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*The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting
Is Wanted as a Bride*

Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: *Yoru Ichige*

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The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting
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Sidis

Supposedly the next in line for the Razanate throne. Lyse's fiancé. He knows her from her previous life, and he's aware that she has retained her memories even after being reincarnated. Acted as the emperor's knight while in Olwen.

Lyse

The daughter of an Olwenian baron. Serves as a lady-in-waiting at the royal palace. She remembers her past life as a knight of the empire, including a dark secret that had her avoiding all things imperial... until she ended up engaged to Sidis.

The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride
Character Profiles



Kirstin

Emperor Egbert's older sister and the current Duchess Lasuarl.

Karl

Kirstin's son. Has weak magic for a member of the imperial family.

Lasuarl

An imperial duke and captain of the knights.

Alcede

An imperial duke and a friend of Sidis's who encouraged his engagement to Lyse. Has an insatiable sweet tooth.

Egbert

The Razanate emperor. Fell ill in Olwen because of the Donan Faith, but has since returned to normal.

Glossary

The Light of Origin

A pillar of light said to be left by the gods following the creation of the world. Though it bestows blessings upon the land and people around it, it also attracts monsters.

Razanate Empire

Home to the Light of Origin, which grants most of its nobles long lives and magic powers. The emperor visits each of the nation's vassal states once every five years.

Kingdom of Olwen

A small kingdom to the southwest of the Razanate Empire. One of its vassal states.

Donan Faith

A new religion that's been catching on lately, though its extremist teachings are widely frowned upon. Its followers distrust the empire.

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Prologue: A Homecoming to an Old Home

Lyse woke to someone softly shaking her shoulder. It seemed that she'd dozed off, most likely because she hadn't gotten much sleep the night before.

"Lyse..."

When she opened her eyes, they met the gaze of a silver-haired man looking down at her. It was her fiancé, Sidis. Lyse was a bit embarrassed. She'd leaned on him in her sleep. And for some reason, he'd used his jacket to cover her face.

Was I drooling? Maybe he was trying to hide it. Lyse thus wiped her mouth discreetly, but found nothing on it.

She honestly couldn't think of any other reason for someone to hide her face. Her features were the very definition of ordinary, right down to her common brown hair and blue eyes. Sidis had called her beautiful before, but most likely with a parental sort of affection—Lyse was quite sure he was the only one who saw her that way.

But whatever the case, Lyse apologized to him for the trouble: "I'm sorry for falling asleep..."

"Think nothing of it. Ah, you must be a bit hot," he replied, giving her a smile as he removed his jacket from her. "I didn't want to chance anyone else seeing your adorable sleeping face, so I covered you up."

"Urk..."

Lyse's cheeks burned at such a sugary-sweet line. Sidis was the only person in her life who ever complimented her like this, so she wasn't used to it yet. If she kept looking at him—in all the glory of his own captivating beauty—she might have even agreed with him.

"Um, how long was I asleep? Have we reached the imperial capital yet?" she asked instead, attempting to hide her embarrassment as she leaned away from him.

“Not yet,” Sidis replied, gesturing toward the window. “But we’re approaching now. Take a look.”

Lyse was immediately enchanted by the scenery on the other side of the glass pane. Tall white walls encircled the city, above which stood the spire of the imperial palace. And in the background, a beautiful column of light rose high into the heavens...

This was the pillar of the Light of Origin, the remnants of the light that the gods brought into the world at its conception. Seeing its brilliance aglow in the light of day, Lyse felt nostalgia well up in her heart. It almost brought her to tears.

“Welcome home,” Sidis said quietly from beside her.

With a smile, she replied naturally, “It’s good to be back.”

Two months prior in the early days of spring, it had finally been made public that Lyse was formally engaged to Sidis of the Razanate Empire. The Olwenian palace was immediately abuzz with gossip about how a poor baron’s daughter (who’d become a lady-in-waiting by defeating a boar, no less) had gotten so lucky. In reality, however, Lyse had never intended for any of this to happen. It had only been because the emperor’s retinue took an interest in her after learning she had the Light of Origin within her.

At first, Lyse had had no intention of going along with them. But after Sidis, the emperor’s cousin, proposed to her with a heartfelt confession...Lyse fell in love for the first time. Thus she’d ultimately decided to come to the Razanate Empire of her own will.

Chapter 1: The Lady-in-Waiting Comes to the Imperial Capital as a Bride-to-Be

“We’re finally home,” said Emperor Egbert, sovereign of the Razanate Empire.

Though he looked young with his golden hair, keen, green eyes, and sharp, intimidating countenance, he was currently one-hundred-and-fifty years old. Imperial nobles were blessed thanks to the Light of Origin, which not only made the surrounding land fertile, but also bestowed mana and long life on the people who lived nearby.

“I’m still surprised you were reborn after being swallowed into the Light, but I’m glad that we could meet again, even like this,” he continued with an honest smile.

Indeed, Lyse had been reincarnated. She had once been Qatora Harceval, who was much taller and harsher-looking than Lyse was now. Qatora had lived a century ago as an imperial knight, and she’d died tragically early when she was sucked into the Light of Origin while saving a young Sidis from an intruder who’d broken into the imperial villa. Back then, it was her job to mind the young prince as well as the emperor. Seeing the fine ruler he’d become after all these years made her proud.

That little rascal certainly grew up splendidly...

As a child, he was perpetually dragging Sidis into his schemes and driving the poor boy to tears. Qatora had always had her hands full with him. Egbert had also been there to witness her death. The thought tore Lyse up. She couldn’t imagine how painful that experience must have been for him, so she’d told him all about it on their ride back to the empire. She wanted him to know, at least, that it hadn’t been painful for her. In her own words, it was just like slipping into a warm bath and falling asleep.

It was what came next that was the problem. When Lyse first met the trio of imperial gentlemen, she’d tried desperately to get out of an engagement to

Sidis because of the terrible truth she'd learned in her final moments...

The Light of Origin wasn't made by the gods. It was more of a magical mistake.

If Lyse accidentally let that secret slip in the empire, where the Light was treasured as sacred and divine... Her fear of that very situation had forced her to keep her distance from all things imperial. Said fear, however, was fortunately short-lived. As it turned out, Sidis and the emperor were already privy to the truth. Thanks to that, they simply cast a spell on her to keep her from telling anyone else. And with all her worries taken care of, she was finally free to think about marrying Sidis in earnest. The emperor was personally puzzled as to why Lyse had been so against the engagement in the first place, but he understood once Lyse explained her past.

"Now then, we need to be more concerned about what happens from here," said Alcede, an imperial duke in their company who kept his long, black hair tied over his shoulder. "We'll need to hide the fact that you have the Light within you, Miss Lyse. It would be easier if you were able to use magic, but..."

It was incredibly rare for an individual to possess the Light of Origin within themselves. The only imperial blessed with it was Sidis, and thanks to that, his mana was stronger than even the emperor's. They couldn't reveal that Lyse had it as well, as that would make her a target for the Donan Faith—a cult hostile to the empire that used special black stones to incite their followers and inhibit the imperials' magic. Lyse and Sidis could both destroy the stones easily thanks to the power of the Light, but it would still be hard for Lyse to defend herself if the Donan followers came after her in force. The Donan Faith controlled them with hypnosis, meaning Lyse couldn't raise a weapon against them. That was why Sidis, Alcede, and Egbert wanted her to learn to use magic, but...

"Why can't I do it...?" Lyse muttered. Even with daily practice, she hadn't been able to use even the simplest of magic spells.

"Sidis's mana spiked after he came into contact with the Light, so I had thought they were similar in nature, and yet... We've been training you daily, but to think you haven't produced any results at all..." Alcede was normally rather carefree, but currently had a very sour look on his face.

Starting back during the imperials' stay in Olwen, Sidis has been mentoring Lyse in the ways of magic. But as Alcede had said, they'd achieved no results to speak of.

"Is it because Miss Lyse isn't an imperial? Normal humans have a low resistance to magic, after all. It might be a physical difficulty. She *did* get manadrunk off of a cold recovery spell," Alcede posited.

"I can't deny that possibility, but she does have the power to move mana through her body. That's more than even imperial commoners can do. So I think she'll be able to use it in due time. However..." Sidis tried to object to Alcede's hypothesis, but trailed off at the end.

The fact of the matter was that neither man had much to support their respective theories.

"I've gotten used to my mana. I think I only got manadrunk at first due to my lack of previous exposure to it, perhaps not so differently from how even imperials are strongly affected by magic when they're young," insisted Lyse, referring to cases where imperial children would get drunk on defensive magic. Such instances died down with age, likely due to acquired tolerance.

"Then maybe we're going about this the wrong way. Maybe we should regard foreigners the same way we do imperial children in terms of mana development..." Alcede murmured thoughtfully.

"That means it will take significantly longer for her to pick up magic, doesn't it?" said Sidis.

Whatever the case, Lyse's current inability to use magic didn't seem like it would be changing anytime soon. That was why the four of them had decided to keep her Light a secret for now. The fact that she didn't have any other skills worried her, as Sidis was currently the next in line for the throne. Would Razanate really accept her as his bride-to-be? The emperor had said it would be fine because of the engagement magic, but...

Sidis hung his head and lamented, "If only I'd hidden my own Light, Lyse wouldn't need to worry about anything..."

"There's no point crying over milk spilled a hundred years ago. Besides, you

weren't the one who made it public, were you, Sidis? You were just a child back then, only yea tall," Alcede reassured him from his seat across from the couple, holding his hand just under his chin.

Yeah, that's right... He was just about that tall. Recalling both the prince and emperor as children, Lyse took a moment to reflect on how easy it was for her to use magic back then—which only depressed her.

"It's all right. We knew from the beginning that you couldn't use magic, and we still wanted you to marry into the empire. That hasn't changed," Sidis promised her.

"Thank you..."

Though Lyse knew he was trying to cheer her up, her mood didn't improve much. She'd had such high hopes for her magic potential when she first learned that she had the Light within her.

I thought I'd be able to fire off spells like I could in my old life and help defeat monsters!

With her vivid memories of fighting on the front lines, this magic-less predicament was especially frustrating for Lyse. Her thoughts were momentarily interrupted, however, when the carriage stopped and a knock came at the door.

"Your Majesty, it's time to change," announced a chamberlain.

So urged, the emperor and Alcede alighted in favor of boarding the emperor's personal carriage since they'd be entering the capital soon. He and Alcede had only been riding with Sidis and Lyse for conversation. After a few moments, both carriages began moving again.

"Lyse, there's something I'd like to give you," said Sidis, reaching into the under-seat storage compartment to pull out a sword. It was highly decorative, inlaid with small gems—but also sturdy enough to hold up in real battle. Along with a thin sling and metal fastener, he handed it over to Lyse. "I had it made here in the empire. It was delivered to the inn where we stayed last night, so I wanted you to have it."

"A sword for me?"

When Lyse questioned this, Sidis looked straight at her and replied, “I told you that you could have your own back in Olwen, but you objected on the premise that it wasn’t normal for ladies to carry weapons in the kingdom.”

“That’s right...”

“But you’re going to be an imperial woman from now on, so you’re free to carry a sword like one. I wanted you to have a blade I’d chosen for you, so I had this made. I wanted something stunning that would suit you... Will you take it?”

The sword Sidis presented her with resembled the one she’d used in her past life. Being given any sword at all made her happy, and once again reminded her that Sidis acknowledged her knightly nature—that the empire would accept her.

“Thank you, Lord Sidis. With this, I want to be able to battle against monsters!” Lyse declared, clutching the sword to her chest.

Sidis smiled and replied, “It might only be for protecting yourself until you learn some magic, but I’m glad you like it. Now...” he said, momentarily pausing on something that seemed to strike him as strange. “You needn’t be so formal with me, Lyse.”

“Pardon?”

“We’re engaged now. You don’t need to be so concerned about keeping up appearances. I’d like it if you stopped addressing me as ‘lord.’”

“Um, but it would feel strange to stop now... We aren’t married yet, and I’m still just a low-ranking foreign noble while you’re the crown prince...”

Their difference in station was too great. If she stopped being so polite with Sidis, the people around them would think poorly of her. And since she was going to be living in the empire from now on, she didn’t want to do anything to earn the scorn of her peers. She’d had enough of that already.

Because her memories of her past life were so strong, Lyse had never been comfortable with the demure weakness expected of women in Olwen. She’d always acted like an imperial knight—a tough, boar-slaying, sword-wielding knight. Such behavior had ostracized her from Olwenian high society, and Lyse didn’t want to make a similarly uncouth mistake again here in the empire.

“Then,” Sidis suggested, “will you drop the titles once we’re married?”

“Yes, I believe it would be all right then.” Once Lyse became a duchess, she felt there would be no problem calling Sidis by name.

When she nodded, a smile bloomed on his face. He gently took the sword from her arms and placed it on the seat beside them before lifting her now-free hand to his lips for a kiss. It was a loving gesture he’d performed on a number of occasions, but each time he did something so sweet, Lyse nearly cringed with embarrassment. Nevermore, however, did she think of pulling away from him. Every time they touched, she felt something warm—but she could hardly admit that. She was most grateful that she had her inability to resist his touch as cover, because she was still internally mortified.

As Lyse was stewing over this, Sidis leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I can’t wait for the day, then.”

His breathy words seemed even sweeter than usual. Lyse, too, found herself looking forward to their wedding day as Sidis kissed her.

The carriages rolled on, eventually entering the city wall. Inside, citizens were crowded for blocks to greet the emperor’s procession upon his return. The carriages continued north along the main road, finally parting from the sea of people before coming up on the palace grounds. They first passed through the grand gate, where they were saluted by guards, and then followed the road that cut through the expansive front lawn. At last, they finally pulled up to the front entrance of the palace.

Outside were many ladies-in-waiting, knights, and servants, all there to receive the emperor. At the head of the group was a tall man with black hair and slightly upturned eyes. By non-imperial standards, he appeared to be in his forties. He was presumably a member of the imperial family presiding in the emperor’s absence. Whenever the emperor was abroad for inspections, he would designate a relative with powerful mana to act in his place. They needed to be strong enough to protect the palace and capital, after all.

The man bowed deeply to the emperor exiting the carriage. His black hair, tied back in a ponytail, swayed as he leaned forward.

He looks familiar... Feeling she knew this man, Lyse dug through her old memories.

“I am pleased to see you return safe and sound, Your Majesty.”

“Duke Lasuarl, I thank you for taking care of things in my absence,” Egbert replied. “Any problems to report?”

“None whatsoever,” Duke Lasuarl replied, raising his head with a smile.



I remember now...

Duke Lasuarl was captain of the imperial knights. He'd held the same position a hundred years ago as well, making him Qatora's superior officer. His family was a lesser house of the imperial line.

"I hear Your Majesty met with a bit of trouble, however... No, two bits of trouble," he said.

Lyse imagined the first was the Donan believers and their black stones, while the second was most likely Lyse herself.

Duke Lasuarl continued, confirming her suspicions, "I've heard that Prince Sidis, who's abstained from marriage like a maiden sworn to some ancient god, has finally taken a bride. Is this her?"

There, his harsh gaze fell on Lyse. Was he judging her? Seeing if she was fit to marry the man next in line for the throne? Even if so, she still felt it was a bit much.

I thought he was stern a hundred years ago too...

As a member of the imperial family, Duke Lasuarl possessed strong mana. This allowed him to act in his capacity as both a duke and the captain of the knights. He was always on the front lines during monster attacks. Lyse could recall how he fumed when things went awry, and how much his stuffy personality gave him trouble with children. The young emperor-to-be, for one, had teased him relentlessly for it once upon a time. Duke Lasuarl had once even ended up drenched in water and frozen in place after getting wrapped up in a prank. Lyse thought back on those days fondly.

He wasn't sure whether to apologize for getting in the middle of the prince's magic lessons, or to scold him for not paying better attention to his surroundings. He didn't want to get angry at a child...

After a little walk down memory lane, even Duke Lasuarl's austere gaze warmed her heart.

"We can catch you up on the details another time," Alcede cut in from where he stood behind the emperor, bringing an end to the conversation. "His Majesty

is tired from such a long trip. We can discuss everything at the meeting tomorrow.”

“That’s true. We’ve prepared a room for the lady. I’ll have her escorted there, so please, do get some rest. And please come inside, Your Majesty,” Duke Lasuarl said politely with a bow.

With that, everyone began moving. The ladies-in-waiting attended the emperor while the knights made way for him. One particular lady-in-waiting, however, walked over to Lyse with a few servants in black uniforms. She had golden-brown hair and wore a scarlet jacket over her dress.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lyse,” she said. “My name is Atoli, and I shall be assisting you from now on.”

Lyse was a bit bewildered to have a lady-in-waiting she’d worked with in her past life address her so respectfully. She’d known that she’d be treated like a guest here in the empire, but it still didn’t feel real.

“My name is Lyse Winslette. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’ll show you to your room.”

After Lyse greeted her, Atoli began to escort her away. When Sidis followed along, however, the lady-in-waiting stopped in place and gave him a baffled look.

“You’re coming too, Prince Sidis?” she asked.

“It’s her first time in the palace,” Sidis replied as though this were the most obvious thing in the world. “Much less another country. I’m sure she’s nervous. I was the one who asked her to come here with me, so isn’t it only natural for me to accompany her to her room and make sure she feels at ease?”

Atoli stared at the prince in shock, apparently floored by his behavior. Lyse was quite familiar with Sidis fawning over her, so she didn’t find it all that strange, but...

Wait, have I just gotten used to it now?

When she stopped to think about it, it was indeed strange for a woman’s fiancé to tag along when a lady-in-waiting was showing her to her room.

Normally, he would leave the job to the court lady and then go see his fiancée after she was finished unpacking her things. But his desire to accompany Lyse hadn't surprised her in the least.

"You... You're serious? Is this because of all those years you spent loveless...?" Atoli muttered quietly, placing her hand to her cheek. She seemed shocked to see Sidis so clingy with his first lover.

Though Lyse was a bit embarrassed, it also made her happy to know that she was the first thing on Sidis's mind. His affection for her was no dream or delusion.

Atoli was a professional court lady, so she quickly collected herself and said, "Then you're most welcome to come with us."

She seemed to think better of separating the couple by force, and instead invited Sidis to come along. He and Lyse both followed after her, but just then...a warning whistle wailed on the lawn. Seconds later, the bells in the belfry began ringing as well. By then, everyone was already staring into the heavens. If monsters were attacking by land, the bells outside of the city would be ringing. The palace alarm sounding could only mean one thing. Thus knowing their foes would be coming from the sky, the knights immediately moved to action.

"Ready the birds!"

"Shore up our defenses!"

Order after order was shouted—but there wasn't even one call to protect the emperor. The Razanate emperor didn't get to his position without being strong, after all. Said emperor was currently standing on the front line and issuing orders.

"Everyone who has skill against flying monsters, come forward!" he commanded.

"Your Majesty, I'll take Miss Lyse to safety," Atoli reported.

Egbert nodded in response. Seeing and hearing this, Lyse bit her lip.

They have to protect me now...

It would be difficult to join in a fight against monsters—flying ones, at that—without magic. If she jumped in the fray anyway, she'd just be in the way.

Qatora could've handled this...

Lyse was sure of her skill with a sword. Sidis had just given her one too. It hurt to think she'd be excluded from the battle simply because of her lack of magic. And because aerial combat primarily fell to soldiers who rode large birds, it was out of the question for anyone without the necessary training. Lyse knew that she wouldn't be able to handle it as she was now.

"Lyse, I'll see you after," Sidis said before running to the emperor's side.

Not a moment later, someone shouted that the enemy had arrived. Lyse could see monsters descending from the sky. They looked like dragonflies, with four wings attached to their thin bodies. They were much larger than humans and had crocodilian mouths filled with sharp teeth.

Imperial knights rose to meet them on the backs of massive, hawklike birds. The beasts showed no signs of fear as they raced toward the monsters. Magical light sparkled through the air, slamming into the monsters from outside of spear range. They seemed to feel no pain, however, as they continued to fight, undaunted by the damage they were taking.

When they eventually disappeared into black smoke, something dropped from the sky... It was several black, rabbit-like monsters. A few fell not far from where Lyse was standing. All of the ladies-in-waiting and servants looked tense.

"Take Miss Lyse inside! Quickly!"

At Atoli's order, the servants around her started pushing Lyse indoors. Atoli drew her own sword and positioned herself in front of the group as she cast spells at the monsters. She easily took down the first two with lightning magic, but more kept coming.

"Lyse!" Sidis shouted, rushing back to blow away the rest.

A wave of relief washed over the servants. Unlike court ladies, most servants were commoners who couldn't use magic. They'd been quite worried about how they'd drive the monsters back on their own.

Eventually, the raptor-riding knights wiped out the last of the airborne enemies with powerful magic. By the time that was over, the monsters on the ground had already been dispatched and everyone was beginning to regain their composure.

“Lyse, are you all right?” Sidis asked, first and foremost worried for her safety.

“I’m fine. Please, go take care of what you need to do.”

She knew a detailed investigation would follow concerning how monsters had managed to get so close as to attack the palace directly, for it meant they’d either penetrated or bypassed all other layers of defense. Sidis understood such an incident wouldn’t be enough to rattle Lyse, so he readily nodded and returned to the emperor’s side.

“Allow me to show you to your room, then,” Atoli said, sheathing her sword and leading Lyse away as if nothing had happened.

Lyse obediently followed along as the women approached the white walls of the imperial palace. But as she ascended the steps to the entrance, she heard voices from somewhere...

“Is Prince Sidis truly going to marry a woman who can’t fight?”

“His Majesty must have given in and allowed it since he wouldn’t choose anyone else. It’s better than him not marrying at all. There’s still a chance that she’ll mother children who can use magic.”

She knew exactly who’d asked that. Moving only her eyes, she glanced to see a displeased-looking Duke Lasuarl standing a short distance away.

“But what if she doesn’t? What if she has children who can’t fight either?”

Lyse looked downward. Normally, members of the imperial family married other nobility to ensure their children were born with mana. Without it, they wouldn’t be able to defend the empire or even remain near the Light of Origin.

Moreover, Sidis wasn’t just any member of the imperial family. He was special. He had the Light within him, after all.

I want to be able to fight... I want to be able to use magic.

Lyse’s misgivings about her situation were growing. If only she could cast a

few spells, that would solve everything.

If only... she thought as she followed Atoli inside the palace.

After arriving at her room, Lyse had a chance to calm down and change clothes. She then unpacked her things and had just settled in for a cup of tea when Sidis came knocking.

Oh, he's here already?

Though it was near sundown now, she was surprised to see him so soon. Since he was handling the paperwork regarding the afternoon's incident and all the ensuing aftermath, she'd assumed he'd be much later—if he made it to see her again at all that night.

Sidis, on the other hand, seemed to think he'd taken too long and apologized thusly, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, Lyse. I hope you weren't too bored with Atoli here."

With that, he approached Lyse and grasped her hands, staring right into her eyes. When Lyse looked away, she saw all of the servants in the room watching with smiles on their faces. She simply had to bear the embarrassment, however, as she still couldn't shake Sidis's touch.

Doing her best to stay calm, Lyse replied to him, "She was most attentive. Were you able to finish your reports?"

"All is well. It will fall on Alcede to follow through on the investigation, and with a steady supply of sweets, he's all too happy to do the job," he explained. He'd clearly foisted some of the work on Alcede—a feat he could likely only get away with as the emperor's cousin—but Lyse never doubted he'd done his part as well.

"I'm relieved," she said.

"Miss Lyse is quite a woman," Atoli remarked. "Most foreign ladies would have fainted at the mere sight of monsters, even if they'd been forewarned of such attacks. Her mettle is impressive."

Lyse feigned a smile at the compliment. She knew all too well that she would have fainted herself if not for her memories from her past life. Being separated

from Sidis so soon would have been dreadful—especially in the chaos of battle.

“Thank you, but it’s all thanks to Lord Sidis and His Majesty for informing me of the situation here beforehand,” she fibbed, knowing it would seem strange if she didn’t say such a thing.

Sidis nodded and added, “Lyse is actually rather skilled with a blade. It would take more than that to shake her. She’s quite courageous for a foreign noblewoman.”

“I’d heard she has some skill with a sword. Thanks to that, I felt a sort of kinship when I met you that I don’t with most ladies from abroad,” Atoli confessed with a smile.

Seeing this, Lyse was overwhelmed with a warm feeling. Where Olwen had treated her like a rebel, the empire was embracing her. Her skill with a blade and her fearlessness around monsters were considered praiseworthy here. Lyse was thrilled, yet that very same thought triggered a dark regret in her... *If only I could use magic like I used to, Duke Lasuarl wouldn’t disapprove of me so.*

“Lyse,” Sidis interjected. “I know we’ve just finished a long journey, but if you’re feeling up to it...”

“Is there something you’d like to do, Lord Sidis?” Lyse asked with a quizzical tilt of her head.

“After tomorrow, it will probably be more difficult for you to leave the palace. As such, there’s somewhere I’d like to take you this evening,” Sidis replied with a nod.

“You mean somewhere outside of the palace?”

Given what he’d said, she could only assume that’s what he meant. Tomorrow, Sidis’s family—the imperial family—would be holding a ceremony to formally bless their engagement. And once Lyse officially became the fiancée of the crown prince, she would be put under heavy guard as a “weak” foreign lady who couldn’t use magic. She couldn’t imagine being allowed to set foot outside.

In spite of his dukedom, Sidis lived at the palace. Because he possessed the Light, he was put in charge of the villa where the Light of Origin was housed. He and Lyse would thus continue to live here in the palace even after they were

married, meaning there'd be even less of a need to leave the palace grounds in the future. But just for today, no one would stop them.

"You want to take her sightseeing now? Just the two of you?" Atoli asked worriedly, and with good reason. She saw Lyse as weak (by imperial standards).

Sidis, however, was insistent on the matter. He replied, "No one would suspect us of leaving the palace so soon after arriving. I've arranged for some guards, for caution's sake. So, please, won't you allow it just this once?"

Atoli seemed moved by Sidis's earnestness. She smiled much like an older sister would when giving in to the whims of her younger brother. "I never thought you'd be so passionate, Prince Sidis. I'm much happier to see you like this than acting like a man who's given up on the world... I'll tell His Majesty, but I shan't tell anyone else," she agreed with that one caveat. She'd have to tell the emperor for safety's sake, in case anything should happen.

"Thank you, Atoli," replied Sidis. He then extended his hand to Lyse. "Let us go."

And so the couple left the palace with three guards in an inconspicuous carriage, which was painted black but lacked any ornamentation or decorative flourishes. It looked like it might belong to a not-so-well-off nobleman. It crossed the moat and followed the wide, tree-lined lane into the city...but where was it going?

"Where are you taking me, Lord Sidis?" Lyse asked.

"You'll see when we get there," he replied.

This was the second time she'd asked now, but he'd yet to give her a real answer. He was quite stubborn. If he'd decided to keep his lips sealed on the matter, there was no way he'd let their destination slip before they arrived.

He used to tell me everything when he was a child...

It was times like this that made Lyse truly appreciate how different he was. People normally retained at least some of their childhood personality into maturity. Lyse could still see traces of a little rascal in the emperor, for example. Yet Sidis... Sidis seemed totally different.

Lyse couldn't help wondering if that was the effect of what happened in the imperial villa all those years ago. Qatora had fought with an intruder in order to protect Sidis, yet ended up getting sucked into the Light of Origin herself in the process. Sidis not only saw her die, but spent an entire year bedridden after the fact. Lyse was worried that had changed him.

As she turned all this over in her head, the carriage continued rolling down a street through an aristocratic neighborhood. When Lyse glanced out the window, it suddenly hit her—she recognized this place. In the century since her death, the houses had been built up and the trees had grown taller, yet Lyse was certain she knew it from somewhere... But where? It took her a few seconds to put her finger on it, and when she did, she intently stared out the window at the scenery.

An ordinary boulevard. The trees were thicker than she remembered, and they were now pruned to spread their branches wide. There should have been a particularly large tree and a cute little house ahead, but it was now empty land. The carriage then turned a corner and crossed a stream, from which Lyse could see a mansion wreathed in yellow mimosa flowers.

"It's hardly changed at all..." she whispered.

Hearing this, Sidis turned to her with a smile and asked, "Do you know where we are now?"

"It's my old home..."

Indeed, this was where Qatora and the viscount-ranking Harceval family had lived. Both her father and brother had worked as civil officials. Her mother had loved baking, and whenever she made too many cookies, she'd give them to the servants or local children. Thanks to her, the Harceval estate was colloquially known as "the cookie lady's house." Qatora's brother had loved sweets himself, and had once mimicked the neighborhood children by saying to his mother, "Cookies please, cookie lady!" Needless to say, it had earned him a smack rather than a treat.

All in all, the Harcevals were like any other low-ranking noble family, but recalling those ordinary days made Lyse miss them terribly. Before now, her memories of the past had all been incredibly distant. But to see her old

residence so close felt different. If she got out of the carriage and walked ten paces, she'd be *home*. She stared long and hard at the patinated front gate that looked just like she remembered it.

"I'm sorry to say your father passed thirty years ago," Sidis said quietly. "Your mother twenty."

"So they're already gone..."

Lyse had been too afraid to ask about the fate of her family. Given her parents' elderly ages at the time she passed herself, she had suspected they were no longer of this world. Their mana was vastly inferior to that of the imperial family, so their lifespans were naturally shorter as well. Lyse had been prepared for that—she was resigned to it, even—but the thought that she'd never see her parents again still saddened her.

"What about my brother...?"

"Your brother still works at the palace as a civil official. He lives here with his wife and children."

Lyse was relieved to hear that her brother was alive and well. If he was working at the palace, she might even cross paths with him someday. Lyse now understood why Sidis had wanted to bring her to the Harceval estate. "Lyse Winslette" had no connections in the empire, and certainly no reason to visit a place like this after today.

"Thank...you..." she said, truly grateful for the opportunity.

"It's my pleasure. I've always wanted to bring you here," Sidis replied.

He then leaned in to hug her, and she quietly let him. It was true that she couldn't resist his touch, but his embrace right now made her feel at ease.

"Let's go," he said after a silent moment.

"Are we going somewhere else?"

"Just to the house."

"What?!" Lyse yelped in wide-eyed shock. She'd thought they were only here to see it from afar. "You mean we're going inside?!"

“I already sent word that we’d be coming. Don’t worry. I’m a regular visitor here myself, and you’ll be my guest. It’s just...if we don’t do it now, I’m afraid we may never have the chance.”

“That’s true...”

Lyse no longer had anything to do with her old life here as Qatora. If she wanted to visit the Harceval estate in the future, she’d have to “coincidentally” meet and make friends with her brother’s wife. The odds of them ever crossing paths, however, were exceptionally low. Lyse would only ever have rare occasion to leave the palace, and her brother’s wife would only ever have rare occasion to come. It seemed hopeless.

“I can come here alone whenever I like, but...” Sidis began.

“Why is that?” Lyse asked. She couldn’t imagine any reason that her brother would have more contact with the crown prince than he would with her.

Yet Sidis answered without hesitation, “I frequently stop by to talk about Qatora... It’s something of a habit now.”

“I see...”

Lyse understood what he meant. After seeing Qatora die right in front of him as a child, it wasn’t strange that he’d come to her family to help sort out his feelings. But...

Wait... He’s been visiting all this time?

It had been about a century since Qatora’s demise. Even if Sidis made a habit of visiting on the anniversary of her death, the time for that had passed. Even for exceptionally long-lived nobles, the imperial mourning period was fifty years. The only people who would keep grieving longer were generally immediate family—spouses, parents, and children. But Sidis was none of those things.

Lyse was puzzled. If Sidis hadn’t been visiting until recently, then he had no reason to suddenly drop by now after returning from abroad. Yet if he really *had* been visiting Qatora’s family all this time, that suggested he was bereaved like a widower. Lyse could remember him asking her to marry him when he was a boy, but...

Lyse suddenly understood Atoli's earlier words: *"I'm much happier to see you like this than acting like a man who's given up on the world."* It was clear to the people around Sidis that he wasn't able to forget Qatora, even as an adult. He'd refused to marry all this time, and since he was still visiting Qatora's family...it wasn't hard to piece together that he still had feelings for her.

As Lyse was pondering all this, the carriage pulled into the estate and up to the front entrance. There was no turning back now. Urged by Sidis, she gingerly stepped outside. She looked solemnly over the unchanged house and spotted a man at the door. By Olwenian standards, he looked to be in his mid-forties. But his gray-streaked hair tied into a ponytail, his flustered expression, and everything else about him took Lyse back...for this man was none other than her older brother.

"Welcome, Prince Sidis," he said, his manners much more calm and polished than Lyse remembered.

"I apologize for dropping by so suddenly, Gösta. I came to tell you that I believe this will be my final visit."

"Your final visit?" he repeated quietly, briefly glancing at Lyse before his shocked expression softened. "Ah, yes, I understand. I've heard about your engagement. Congratulations, Prince Sidis."

"Indeed. That's why there's someone I'd like you to meet—this is my fiancée, Lyse. I've already told her everything."

"Hello," Lyse greeted him.

She knew it was a curt introduction, but she couldn't help herself. She was overwhelmed to see her brother after so long, and now that she was here in front of him, there was so, so much she wanted to ask.

What happened to everyone after I died? Were our parents happy until the very end? I'm so glad you're still alive and well...and that I got to see you again.

But though it pained her, she held every word back. Lyse Winslette had no reason to say such things.

"How good of you to come, Miss Lyse! I am Gösta Harceval," he replied.
"Please, do come in."

At his invitation, she stepped into the house full of memories. Gösta's family greeted her in the entryway. His wife had the same soft demeanor as a hundred years earlier, and Lyse could tell that she was happy. Their son had only been a few years old when Qatora passed, and though he seemed to be absent, there was now a little girl in his place.

"I'm glad to see your daughter doing well," said Sidis. "Halqatora, was it?"

Hearing the girl's name, Lyse felt a pang in her chest. *Did my brother name her after me?*

"When we named her that, I was a bit worried she'd grow up to be a wild one like my late sister, but thankfully she's as gentle as can be," Gösta told them with a smile.

That's so mean! Lyse thought, but she couldn't help smiling herself. She was glad that her death was so far in the past that it could be made light of now, and that the pain of her passing was no longer raw.

Afterward, Gösta showed Lyse and Sidis to Qatora's old room. Lyse had expected it to be repurposed for a child by now, but it was unoccupied. Her old belongings had long been cleaned up, of course. The room contained a bed and a nightstand, as well as a sofa, so it could be used for a guest—but other than that, there was only a display case.

The amber vitrine contained three portraits, a sword, and a medal studded with scarlet gemstones. Lyse recognized the portraits as Qatora and both her parents. She also recognized the sword—an old one of Qatora's. She didn't recognize the medal, however. Presumably it was something granted to her family after her death. She felt a bit guilty that they'd left her room vacant all this time, but...

"I apologize, Gösta. You've kept her room like a memorial because of me, haven't you? Since I kept visiting..."

Now it all made sense to Lyse. If a member of the imperial family like Sidis had continued to visit, of course her family wouldn't dare repurpose the room. Lyse felt badly for Sidis as well. If she'd just been able to tell him before she died that she was proud and that she wasn't in pain, he never would've had to suffer this way.

But Qatora's brother shook his head and replied, "No, it's been hard for us to change it as well. My sister died in the line of duty protecting a member of the imperial family. We knew she would've been proud... She was so stupidly serious. My parents left her room this way in her honor."

"But your son will soon be finding work, and someday even a bride. You'll need all of the space here that you can spare. Besides, you needn't worry about me anymore," Sidis said, touching Lyse's shoulder. "If I hold on too tightly to the past any longer, I fear I may isolate the woman I intend to spend my future with. That's why I don't believe I'll be coming by anymore. Thank you for welcoming me all this time, Gösta."

Qatora's brother shook his head at Sidis's apologetic thanks, saying, "Qatora would have been thrilled that her sweet young lord continued to think of her. She never married, but she told me that she thought of you and His Majesty as her own. She loved you both dearly."

Recalling having said those exact words, Lyse got a little embarrassed. The way she'd doted on the boys was precisely why her parents had fretted she'd lose any interest in having a family of her own. Being in her old home really *did* dredge up all kinds of memories.

After that, Lyse and Sidis took their leave. Once they were back in the carriage, Lyse turned to him and said, "Thank you again for bringing me here today. A great weight has been lifted from my heart, and it's a relief to have some closure."

She was glad to know that her brother lived peacefully and that Sidis had been there to comfort her family in her stead. She was also glad to know that they understood her. On the other hand, it had rekindled her desire to become as strong as she once was. Perhaps the spark was seeing her old sword again.

She'd kept training even after being reborn, so Lyse wanted to believe that her swordsmanship wasn't inferior in any way. But without the ability to use magic, in the eyes of the empire, she needed to be protected. And that wasn't what she wanted—Lyse wanted to be the one protecting other people. She wanted to be strong enough to protect her brother and family who still thought of her. Strong enough to protect the emperor and Sidis, just like she had in the

old days.

So resolved, she informed Sidis: "Seeing my family gave me cause to reflect on the past...and I feel even more strongly than ever now that I want to learn to use magic. I want to help fight."

Sidis giggled upon hearing this.

"Did I say something odd?" Lyse questioned.

"No, I was just thinking that that part of you hasn't changed...even after being reborn."

Lyse was kind of glad to hear him say that, but confessed, "The fact that I haven't been able to use a single spell even after practicing for so long has me worried, though. Using magic came easily to me in my past life."

"Don't worry. You have the Light of Origin within you. It's functionally similar to mana, so it shouldn't be out of the question for you. Physically, however, you're still a normal human from Olwen. So though you may not be able to use magic like the rest of us, we should be able to figure something out if we dedicate ourselves to it," said Sidis, comforting her.

With a nod and a smile, Lyse replied, "I won't give up!"

Looking relieved, Sidis lifted Lyse's hand to kiss the back of it. "Even after being reborn, you're still so honest and beautiful."

"Er, I don't think it's that praiseworthy..." she replied in confusion.

He gave her a puzzled look in return. "I wasn't specifically trying to praise you. That's simply what I think."

"That's even more embarrassing..." Lyse squeaked, casting her eyes downward.

Chapter 2: Unpredictable Obstacles Rise Quickly

The next morning, Sidis and the rest of the imperial family gathered in a ceremonial room within the palace.

“First, your oaths,” announced Egbert. “You will not reveal anything I deem necessary to hide.”

“We so swear,” the crowd replied.

At the emperor’s behest, the ten people present traced a shape on their left palms before raising their hands high. When they did, their palms briefly shone white—a sign the magical oath was now in effect. The group then sat down to start the meeting. There had already been a council regarding yesterday’s attack, meaning this council was to discuss topics not meant for the ears of other aristocrats. That was the reason for the magical oath.

After a solemn moment, the emperor began, “We have two topics to discuss today. The first is the Donan Faith, which is just as dangerous as I previously reported.”

Everyone nodded, their expressions tense. During the imperial retinue’s stay in Olwen, they’d sent home a dossier on the black stones. Their reported effects included brainwashing people, draining their mana, and worse. There was a chance that they could produce a resistance to the Light of Origin. Seeing the grim looks on everyone’s faces, Sidis could tell they all understood the gravity of the situation.

“However, I left key information out of my previous report to prevent any leaks,” Egbert continued. “We’ve come to discover that the leaders of the Donan Faith are the descendants of imperial nobles who were cast out of the country. We’ve also learned that their black stones can amplify their mana.”

The room was instantly abuzz at this revelation.

“You’re saying they all have ties to imperial nobility?” Duke Lasuarl asked, the frown on his face becoming even more severe.

“Aren’t all imperial nobles with mana monitored?” a thin, middle-aged-looking woman with golden hair pinned up high asked nervously. This was Kirstin, the emperor’s older sister and Duke Lasuarl’s wife.

The one to answer both of their questions was Alcede, who was sitting beside the emperor. He explained, “There’s a complication. The woman who plotted against His Majesty possessed mana, if only a very little. According to her confession, we learned that there have been a number of nobles who’ve discarded children without mana outside the country.”

“They’ve done *what?!?*” Kirstin gasped.

Though everyone present looked troubled, she took this news the hardest. Sidis knew why. Her only son didn’t have much mana to speak of, despite being born to a mother from the imperial family and a father famed for the strength of his magic. Nevertheless, she’d raised him lovingly. She simply couldn’t understand why someone would get rid of their own child for *that*.

“We traditionally allow the manaless children of noble families to emigrate if they so choose, although it now seems that concession has been abused. Certain parents have lied about their children’s wishes, essentially casting them out of the country. And to complicate matters further, it seems some of those manaless children went on to have children of their own who were blessed with mana. It is this second generation of resentful expatriates that formed the Donan Faith,” Sidis explained as if it were none of his business before sighing.

“All we can do now to correct the matter going forward is to change the law. Even the manaless children of noble families shall be duty bound to stay in the empire,” said the emperor.

The room at large nodded in response. “We must act with haste, then. There are always those who will find ways to circumvent the law, but we should be able to stem such behavior,” a member of the imperial family said, suggesting preventative measures with a solemn tone. The others also agreed to carry out the plan quickly.

“Now, let us move on to our second topic,” Alcede urged.

The emperor announced the next order of business: “Sidis’s fiancée.”

“Congratulations on your engagement,” someone said, prompting the others to offer their congratulations as well.

“It’s wonderful that you’ve finally decided to marry, Prince Sidis.”

“Though it’s a shame that you didn’t choose an imperial lady.”

“There isn’t much hope for your children’s mana, is there...?”

“Don’t say that. Prince Sidis is special. Even if his wife has no mana, there’s a chance their children will inherit some of the Light.”

The imperial family had high hopes that Sidis would pass his gift on to his offspring. If all he’d had in his favor was strong mana, they likely would have objected to his marrying a foreign woman due to the high chance that their children would inherit little to none of it. But Sidis was special—he had the Light of Origin within him. Most of the family was willing to approve of any engagement on the premise of passing it on. Sidis was thankful for this, but also wary of their rationale. He hoped that no one would suggest separating him and Lyse if they found out they were both Light bearers.

Yet in spite of his worries, the emperor rather unaffectedly revealed the truth to the room: “We’ve discovered that Sidis’s fiancée actually has the Light of Origin within her as well.”

The chatter about the prospects of Sidis’s future children immediately came to a halt. After a few moments of silence, everyone exploded into confusion. Most of them were so shaken that they had trouble speaking.

“Your Majesty...?”

“That’s impossible!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—”

The ever-calm Duke Lasuarl, however, furrowed his eyebrows and questioned, “Your Majesty, if I heard correctly... If I heard correctly, you just said that there is someone else who possesses the Light of Origin.” The odd pause halfway through, as if he doubted himself, indicated even he was rather shaken.

The emperor replied with a weighty nod.

“We’re not yet sure of the cause,” Sidis lied nonchalantly.

They knew that Lyse possessed the Light of Origin because she’d come into contact with it before, but they couldn’t reveal as much since they’d decided to keep Lyse’s past life a secret. If the truth got out, there might be a rash of people throwing themselves into the Light of Origin in hopes of being reincarnated with some of it. It would also make Lyse’s current life complicated, as she was now living as a different person.

“Wh-Whatever the case, it’s a wonderful thing for there to be more Light bearers,” Kirstin said, softening the tension in the room.

That prompted someone else to ask, “I assume Miss Lyse also possesses strong mana?”

Sidis almost involuntarily shuddered as he stammered, “About that...”

“Your mana spiked since acquiring the Light, Prince Sidis. It also tremendously slowed your aging.”

Realizing the precarious direction this conversation was headed, the emperor decided to put a stop to it. “She cannot use magic,” he said definitively. “Alcede and Sidis tried teaching her on our way back to the empire...but it seems the Light may be something altogether different from mana, even though it amplified Sidis’s,” he said, casually denying the Light was its own form of mana.

“So it’s different from mana? How curious...”

Hearing this, the members of the imperial family all looked around at one another. It seemed no one questioned what the emperor said, however, as none of them seemed doubtful. Sidis prayed they’d buy the lie. The reason they’d congratulated him on his engagement was because Lyse’s lifespan should be far shorter than that of an imperial noble. The imperial family was just happy that Sidis had finally taken an interest in marriage, as they presumed they could marry him off to an imperial noblewoman after his first wife passed.

It would be a different story, however, now that they knew Lyse also possessed the Light of Origin. Now that they knew she had extraordinary power of her own, Sidis was fearful that there would be interference in the name of strengthening the imperial line further. They might want him and Lyse to marry

different people to spread the Light, for example—and that they'd do everything to change Lyse's mind. Sidis wanted to believe that no one would forcefully separate the two of them, but...

"There's still hope, isn't there?" Kirstin asked, looking at the emperor entreatingly. "We can't say for certain that the Light of Origin has no effect on one's mana. From what you've said, you don't understand their relationship yourself, do you, Your Majesty?"

The emperor hesitated for a reply. He couldn't out himself and the truth here.

Alcede calmly tried to rain on Kirstin's parade by saying, "Nevertheless, Sidis has already performed the engagement ritual."

Sidis was sure that would put a stop to this line of questioning. But just as he thought so...

"Actually, speaking of..." someone said.

What Sidis heard next made him feel as though he'd been thrown into the sea.

Later that night, Sidis paid a visit to Lyse's room. She'd already dressed down for bed, but she pulled back the curtain when she heard the knock at her patio door.

"What are you doing here at this hour, Lord Sidis?" she asked, though she was actually relieved to see him.

She remembered the layout of the palace from her past life. As imperials were exceptionally long-lived, she even recognized people here and there. It was incredibly awkward for her, as she had to pretend to be none the wiser. Atoli and the servants had given her funny looks all day because she seemed to know a little too much. Whenever she accidentally said something revealing, she'd had to feign ignorance and brush it off by claiming Sidis had told her all about it beforehand. The farce was exhausting.

Nevertheless, it was quite late for a man to be visiting a lady's bedchamber. Sidis seemed to understand Lyse's trepidation, as he immediately moved to the point. "There's something I want to show you, and it has to be tonight. I know

it's late, but I'd like for you to come to my room," he said.

"There's something you want to show me?"

"Yes."



Though he didn't say exactly *what* he wanted to show her, Lyse was eager for the opportunity to talk with him some, so she had him wait outside while she put a blue dress on over her nightgown. She didn't see a problem with the two of them stepping out briefly. Since they wanted as few people as possible to see them, however, they decided to slip through the garden to Sidis's quarters. Even if they were engaged, a woman sneaking into a man's room at night would be frowned upon.

Sidis thus led Lyse by the hand through the yard. The garden hadn't changed much in the hundred years since she'd last seen it. Possibly due to their own long lifespans, imperial nobility and the imperial family weren't much for change. Lyse could only assume that was why the plot hadn't been rearranged or replanted even after all these years.

Slinking past guards as they went, Sidis and Lyse finally made it to his quarters some distance away. His room, which was divided into an antechamber and his bedchamber, was on the second floor and had a settled, well-lived-in feeling to it after decades of use. It seemed he'd resided here all his life. Once inside the anteroom, Sidis led Lyse to the sofa.

"What was it that you wanted to show me?" she asked.

"Wait here just a moment," he replied, disappearing into his bedroom briefly before reappearing with a knife in hand.

Lyse recognized its silver-decorated sheath. "That's..." she faltered.

"It's yours—from your past life."

It was unmistakably Qatora's. "Why do you have this?" Lyse asked.

Sidis hesitantly replied, "After you died...I begged for something to remember you by. I was still bedridden from touching the Light, so I asked His Majesty for a favor during one of his visits. Your parents then gifted me this."

"I see..."

It wasn't common for imperial nobility to receive mementos of those who died to protect them. Given the large number of casualties in the battles against monsters, such a practice would be highly impractical. But Sidis was just a boy

when Qatora had sacrificed herself, and his father was keenly aware of how much he loved Qatora; she was like a sister to him. He'd thanked her many a time for her role in his son's life. Lyse could remember his words even now — *"It's because of you and Prince Egbert that Sidis was able to rediscover joy after losing his mother."* Qatora's parents had likely agreed to give the young prince a keepsake to grant his wish and ease his grief.

"This helped me endure all the pain," Sidis said with a weak smile.

"Ah..."

Seeing him like this reminded Lyse of when he was a child. He was a fine man now, but he still had the same delicate fragility of his younger years. But how should she respond? Should she say that she was glad, even though it was a testament to how tormented he'd been by her death?

While she was fretting over the answer, the door to Sidis's room flew open. Lyse shot to her feet, prepared for a fight—but a skinny middle-aged woman entered the room. With golden strands of hair falling out of her updo and fire in her blue eyes, she looked as though she'd run all the way here...and she seemed familiar to Lyse somehow. Atoli stood a few steps behind her with an uneasy smile; she'd likely escorted her here.

"Kirstin?" Sidis asked.

Hearing the woman's name, Lyse finally remembered her. This was Kirstin, the emperor's older sister. Sidis had always called his cousin by her name, just like the emperor did. Lyse's time-worn memories and the fact that Kirstin used to have a fuller, more feminine figure had kept her from recognizing her immediately.

Kirstin looked at Sidis angrily, demanding, "Just what is going on here?!"

But in spite of her rage, Sidis didn't seem concerned at all. "I've invited Lyse to my room to talk," he said plainly. "Wasn't that what we decided at the meeting?"

"You *did* say that you'd explain things to her—but to bring her to your room at night?! Do you realize what people will say about Miss Lyse now should she marry someone else?!"

“...Hmm?” Lyse’s ears perked up at that last sentence, and while she was pondering what she’d just heard...

Kirstin tried to enter the room, but stopped when she hit an invisible wall in her way. “Sidis?!” she yelled.

Though Sidis had stopped Kirstin with magic, he remained calm. “That’s precisely why I’ve brought her here,” he said, pulling Lyse close, as if he never intended to let her go. “Lyse will be staying with me tonight. Atoli, come get her in the morning.”

Atoli gave a small bow at the order. Kirstin, meanwhile, looked aghast at the unabashed declaration.

“Huh...?” Lyse, too, was shocked.

She’d assumed that she’d be going back to her room for the night. If she stayed with Sidis until morning, people would think they’d consummated their relationship before marriage...yet Sidis was acting like the threat of such rumors didn’t concern him at all.

He’s not planning on actually doing anything... Right?

Before now, Sidis had been a perfect gentleman with Lyse. Well, a very affectionate one. Lyse still found it a bit embarrassing when he hugged her in front of other people, but she didn’t think it was out of character for a betrothed couple. Still, did he think it was okay to cross the line now that they’d be getting married? Even if so, why was he being so blatant about it?

When she looked up at him quizzically, he whispered, “I’ll explain later.” It seemed he had a reason for carrying on like this, so Lyse decided to quietly observe the situation for the time being.

Kirstin, however, wasn’t about to do the same. She loudly complained as Sidis embraced Lyse, “You don’t have to go that far! And you, Miss Lyse! You should be ashamed of yourself! Get away from Sidis at once.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why, but I just can’t resist Lord Sidis’s touch...” Lyse answered honestly, and Kirstin promptly went red in the face. *Did I say something wrong?*

Sidis seemed amused at this. “There shouldn’t be a problem if we say I forced Lyse here, no? Maybe it would be even better to say I stole her away in her sleep. She can’t use magic, so no one would think her at fault if I forced myself on her,” he suggested, then turned to Atoli. “If anything happens, I’d appreciate it if you’d spread that rumor for me.”

“As you wish,” Atoli agreed coolly, giving another small bow.

Her hair nearly standing on end now, Kirstin screeched, “Everyone would think *you* were at fault, Sidis! We cannot have the next emperor’s reputation marred by rumors that he forced himself on a woman! How could you agree to that, Atoli?! And you, Miss Lyse...” Kirstin turned to scold Lyse, but when she saw that she was just quietly watching things play out, she looked away.

The fact that Kirstin seemed unable to bear the sight of even looking at her in Sidis’s arms bothered Lyse. “Lord Sidis,” she said, “I’m not going to run. You can let me go.”

“No, Lyse. We need to show Kirstin how inseparable we are. We’re engaged, after all. I don’t see the problem with us sitting as close as we’d be if we were dancing.”

“That’s true. We *would* be this close if we were dancing...”

Seemingly fed up with the couple, Kirstin next turned to Atoli. “D-Do something!”

“Madam Kirstin, I believe it would be best to safeguard Miss Lyse’s honor,” Atoli replied calmly. “And I must ask...why are you suddenly concerned about Miss Lyse marrying someone else? You were so relieved when His Majesty sent word from Olwen that Prince Sidis had taken a fiancée. I simply do not understand the abrupt change of heart.”

“That’s...”

“What I do understand, however, is that Miss Lyse has made the hard decision to leave her life and come to the Razanate Empire to be with Prince Sidis. The only reason I can think of to separate them is politics, and it would be difficult for her to ward off rumormongering unless we exercise the utmost discretion.”

There was no public reason that any other imperial noble would be pursuing Lyse's hand, and no private reason that Kirstin could reveal at the moment either. Moreover, as a woman herself, it was hard for her to deny the delicate nature of Lyse's current circumstances.

Atoli continued, "It's also impossible for me to break through Prince Sidis's magic. So if he refuses to let Miss Lyse go, I think it is fair to paint him as the villain here."

"Yes, but..." Kirstin didn't seem convinced.

Hearing all this, Lyse began to ponder what was going on. Why was Sidis behaving this way? In truth, after the meeting he'd had with the rest of the imperial family prior that day, he was trying to create a situation in which no one would be able to stop him from marrying Lyse (due to certain lines having been crossed). Had Kirstin been the only one to object to their union, he wouldn't have felt it necessary to take such measures. It seemed the entire family had objected and normal arguments weren't enough to change their minds.

Still, something was strange. Sidis and Lyse had already performed the engagement ritual. The spell couldn't be broken without both of their consent. So why, Lyse wondered, was Sidis going this far to defend their engagement?

After thinking for a bit, Lyse turned to Kirstin. "Ma'am, I will be staying with Lord Sidis tonight. As Atoli said, I came to the empire because I intend to marry him—and I would never dream of marrying anyone else. If such a thing was suggested at the meeting, then I don't care what rumors of impropriety are spread to prevent it."

Lyse couldn't even think about being with someone other than Sidis. He was her first and only love. And since this entire happening was beyond her comprehension, she decided to follow Sidis's lead on it. She knew he would never lead her astray. And at her declaration, Kirstin fell silent—likely unable to offer a good argument in favor of meddling with Sidis's marriage and his wishes.

Most marriages in the empire were matters of the heart. Perhaps because battling monsters was the aristocracy's first priority, it was considered important for nobles to marry based on love rather than politics. It was rare for

imperials to enter into arranged marriages, and even if their families pushed for such a thing, they were never upheld unless both parties agreed to their arrangement. Lyse knew as much from her old days in the empire, so she thought it odd that there was talk of her and Sidis marrying other people, regardless of their inner Light.

Kirstin stood there, her eyes darting around the room as she tried to think of another reason to object. She wasn't willing to relent just yet. But as her gaze turned to the side, she yelped in shock, "Your Majesty!"

Right on cue, the emperor appeared at the edge of the open doorway, accompanied by a few knights.

"Sister, what are you doing here this late?" he asked. He must have seen Sidis and Lyse, but rather than seeming perturbed, he instead smiled at Kirstin.

It seemed to Lyse that he knew what was going on. Perhaps he was even in on it with Sidis. Nevertheless, she began to worry about the number of people who were seeing her like this. She was still practically frozen in Sidis's embrace.

Kirstin wasted no time voicing her complaints: "It isn't proper for a lady to be in a man's room this late at night. Your Majesty, please stop Sidis!"

But the emperor simply smirked and put his hand to his chin. "I hear you...but I imagine Sidis is using magic to keep you out of his room. His spells are difficult to break through, even for me."

By imperial family standards, Kirstin's mana was rather weak. She couldn't break through Sidis's magic even if she tried, meaning she was completely reliant on her brother to do it for her.

"You must talk him down, Your Majesty! He'd listen to you!"

"Is that true?" the emperor asked, looking to Sidis.

"I've already refused. And we could have kept the whole thing quiet if dear Kirstin hadn't raised such a fuss over it. You'll instruct your knights to act as though they've seen nothing, won't you, Your Majesty?"

The emperor nodded in response, saying, "If it's necessary to protect Miss Lyse's honor. I've already had talks with the king of Olwen about your marriage,

and I wouldn't want to do anything to jeopardize that."

"Thank you kindly." Sidis bowed in thanks for the emperor's cooperation. "I've finally found the woman I've been dreaming of after all these long years. I don't see the harm in adoring her, day or night... We've already agreed to wed, after all."

"What?!" Lyse exclaimed. She'd been trying so hard to keep quiet, but she was mortified to hear Sidis talk about "adoring" her in front of other people. She wanted nothing more than to run, yet she was still captive in Sidis's arms.

The stares from all the knights felt like they pierced right through her. Even Kirstin was blushing a bit. The emperor, however, was perfectly calm. He was used to Sidis's antics.

"No one would blame you for that, Sidis. She's the first woman who's ever caught your eye since losing your beloved Qatora a century ago. As such, Kirstin, I'd prefer not to do anything uncouth and interfere. I wouldn't want to get on Sidis's bad side, after all. Moreover..." There, the emperor laughed. "I'm sure they need to talk about *that*. We never said it had to be discussed during daylight hours, and we've kept Sidis busy with meeting after meeting. Who are we to object to him seeing his fiancée at night? As for what might happen after they're done talking, well, that's between the happy couple. It would be rude to pry."

And with that decisive statement, the emperor took his leave.

"Y-Your Majesty!" Kirstin tried to stop him in a panic, but he didn't respond.

"Well then, Kirstin, have a good night," Sidis said with a great smile, closing the door on her.

After a few seconds, Kirstin at last gave up with one final grumble. Lyse took a breath as the sound of footsteps faded into the distance. She still wasn't sure exactly what had just happened, but it was at least over for the moment.

"Please allow me to explain, Lyse," Sidis implored her, taking her hand as they sat back down on the sofa.

Seeing him so serious, she decided to ask, "What was all that about? She mentioned me marrying someone else, but..."

It was the emperor's retinue that had petitioned the engagement in the first place. They'd even sent word of it back to the empire while they were still in Olwen, and there hadn't been one word of objection in reply at the time.

"It's because of the Light of Origin," Sidis explained.

"What do you mean?"

"When it was announced that you and I were engaged, we did not share the news that you also possess the Light. We wanted to avoid the possibility of anyone intercepting the message and using that information for ill. We wanted to protect you."

The Donan faithful weren't the only ones who might target Lyse if word got out about her Light. There was a chance that people from other countries would attempt to kidnap and use her for their own ends.

"Thank you," she said, grateful that they'd prioritized her safety.

"You needn't thank us. Since we were the ones to discover your Light, it is naturally our duty to protect you. If not for me, no one would have ever known that you possess the Light of Origin, after all." In other words, she never would have been a target. That was why Sidis felt responsible. "But we disclosed that information to the rest of the imperial family earlier today, and it has...complicated things," he said with a tired sigh. "They're concerned about your Light."

"Even though it was the reason behind our engagement and my coming to the empire?" Lyse asked, surprised to hear it was now a problem.

"That's not quite what I mean," he clarified. "They're all thrilled to have someone else with the Light in the empire. They would even be happy to accept our engagement if the empire were in a better position, but of late, more and more nobles are being born with less mana—even within the imperial family."

"You're saying that wasn't the case in the past?"

Sidis nodded and continued, "There are many in the imperial family who are worried about the weakening of imperial mana, as it's a matter of national defense. That's why, since you and I are the only Light bearers, they want us to marry other people in hopes we'll each pass more power down to our

progeny.”

“That...does indeed seem plausible,” Lyse acquiesced. It wasn’t hard to imagine that they could spread the Light further by diverging their lineages.

“But the matter isn’t that pressing,” Sidis assured her, as there wasn’t an immediate need for the empire to produce children with strong mana. “Imperial nobles are long-lived and capable of bearing children for decades. Even if there’s a dearth of nobles born with strong mana now, there’s yet hope. We should have about another fifty years to wait and see what happens. That said, something like an epidemic could drive up mortality, and should the monsters attack in full force, we’re liable to lose imperials on the front lines...”

“So they’re worried about the number of nobles with strong mana declining?”

“Yes.” After a few moments, Sidis hesitantly continued, “The candidate they suggested for your hand at the meeting is a member of the imperial family with weak mana. They must want to see if you can strengthen his children’s mana.”

“Who is it?” Lyse asked.

“Kirstin’s son, Karl. He was born after Qatora’s death, so you’ve never met him.”

“Madam Kirstin has a son...” Qatora had known Kirstin as a strong-willed but good little girl who took care of her younger brother. It was almost strange for Lyse to think of her as a mother now, even though she’d already heard Kirstin was married to Duke Lasuarl. “So Lord Karl’s mana is weak?”

Even in unions between a member of the imperial family and another noble, there were instances where children were born with less mana than their parents—though it was exceptionally rare. Most members of the imperial nobility had especially strong magic. Duke Lasuarl’s was powerful enough that he alone could defend the entire capital.

“Karl’s magic is so weak that he can’t fight on the front lines... It’s because of him that the rest of the family is worried something is happening. They’re hoping that you would bolster Lasuarl’s bloodline, and possibly even pass on the Light.”

“Is that even how that works?” Lyse asked, uncertain. She and Sidis both

possessed the Light of Origin because they'd come into contact with it. There was no evidence to suggest that it could be passed down from generation to generation.

"I understand your doubts. I'm skeptical about it myself. Judging from your case, it seems more likely that the Light is connected to one's soul rather than the body. But if we shared everything we knew about it...it would just be asking for trouble."

"Why is that?"

"People may sneak into the villa in attempts to gain the Light for themselves."

Even imperial nobility could only handle being in the villa for short periods of time. Sidis was worried that people might try to use that time to sneak close and touch the Light of Origin.

"Isn't that a bit extreme?" Lyse asked.

"It's a risky bet indeed, but one people are willing to take. Trust me. After we discovered that I came to house some of the Light within me, three people sneaked into the villa to do exactly that."

So it's already happened before...

"What happened to them?"

"Two were caught on their way inside. The third lost his arm without receiving any of the Light. Thanks to that, rumors spread that not just anyone could be blessed with the Light of Origin, and the fuss quieted down."

"Thank goodness..."

Lyse wasn't relieved that someone had been injured over it, but rather that people had relented on the mad quest before anyone died. She now understood why Sidis was worried about another rash of attempts.

"So...does Lord Karl want the Light for himself?"

"I think he's sensitive about his mana, but he seems to have made peace with it. He claims to be happy researching magic instead, and he's thrown himself into the pursuit. He's studying a way to use strong magic with little mana."

“That’s a wonderful attitude.” It wasn’t uncommon for members of the imperial family without much mana to withdraw from society, so Lyse thought highly of Karl for his disposition.

Sidis smiled a bit and nodded. “He works hard, quite hard... Too hard, I dare say,” he added with a deep sigh.

“Is something the matter?”

“This pertains to our original discussion... His Majesty, Alcede, and I wanted to use the engagement ritual as a way to counteract any objections to our marriage. That was why we proceeded with it while we were still in Olwen, since it couldn’t be undone after the fact without both of our consent.”

But now Sidis felt threatened, meaning... Lyse looked up at him, unable to believe it.

“Are you suggesting that someone has found a way to forcibly break off the engagement magic?”

This time, Sidis gave a weary nod. “While we were in Olwen, Karl... He developed a ritual that allows a third party to void an engagement contract, which is why the family now wants us both to rethink our marriage options—by force, if necessary.”

It suddenly set in on Lyse why Sidis carried on as he had earlier. “That’s why you want me to stay here with you tonight. To make it harder for me to marry anyone else.”

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t think of any other way to accomplish it. But as you can’t use any magic yourself, we need the rest of the imperial family’s support to protect you in the event something happens. We cannot simply ignore their wishes,” he said, looking incredibly apologetic. “That’s why I asked Atoli to bring Kirstin here. She’s the biggest proponent of splitting us up, so I thought she’d back off if she believed you and I were...committed...to one another.”

That much made sense to Lyse—it certainly explained why Atoli had been able to keep so calm earlier.

“Lyse, I’m sorry this all unfolded before I had a chance to explain,” Sidis continued, bowing his head low.

Lyse rushed to stop him. “Please don’t apologize! I know you were acting in my best interest. Really, I’m thankful that you tried to keep them from forcibly breaking off our engagement. I’m just a bit shocked that they’re so beyond convincing...” That part concerned her greatly. Were they *that* worried about the nobility’s mana?

“It’s because they know the engagement contract isn’t binding anymore. They’re also concerned that if I marry a woman with no magic, you’ll be subject to harassment from nobles who do not understand your situation.”

“I suppose they would’ve had to have given up on us marrying other people if the contract were inviolable. In that case...if I can learn to use magic well enough to take down monsters left and right, that should put their concerns to bed.” If Lyse could do that much, she thought, it would solve everything. “If we can show them that I’m strong enough that I don’t need to be protected, they won’t feel obliged to do it. It should also silence the complaints from nobles who don’t know about my Light.”

“But...”

Lyse understood why Sidis was hesitating. Back in Olwen, and even on their journey to the empire, she hadn’t been able to use one lick of magic.

“Please, give me a bit longer to see if I can do it.” Lyse had only been practicing for less than a month. She was certain it was too soon to give up hope. “I want to be able to use magic so I can stand proudly by your side.”

Sidis fell silent at this declaration, his face a bit red. Lyse had to wonder if she’d said something embarrassing... She’d thought a line like that would be nothing to her fiancé.

He looked away, still blushing, then squeezed her hand tight and let go. “I can see how determined you are. I’ll discuss teaching you magic again with His Majesty. Now, er... Ah, that’s right! Your parents gave me some other mementos as well,” he said, jumping to his feet and rushing into the next room.

Lyse got a bit worried when she heard what sounded like something large fall over, so she approached the slightly ajar door and knocked lightly. “Um, are you all right?” she called.

“F-F-F-F-Fine! Completely fine!”

He certainly didn't *sound* completely fine. Had he tripped and hurt himself? Lyse was concerned, but politely decided to wait for him to come out since it would be rude to peek into someone's bedroom without permission. After a while, Sidis appeared with something in his arms, but...

“Wait, no, not this,” he mumbled, turning back for the door and promptly bumping into it.

It swung open from the impact, and Lyse was absolutely shocked by what she saw inside. “Huh?”

Rather than pictures, the walls were decorated with clothing in protective glass cases. The room was only dimly lit, but Lyse could clearly make out a female knight's scarlet uniform. Beside it were one, two...five dresses as well. Lyse was immediately stricken with the thought that Sidis was a crossdresser, but that receded when she realized all of the women's clothing in his room was familiar.

Beside the hearth sat a desk and chair that also seemed somewhat nostalgic. On top of the desk lay a glass case with a book, the cover of which she was sure she'd seen somewhere before. There were also two longswords on the floor, along with a handkerchief, a letter opener, and a necklace. The sound Lyse had heard earlier was probably him trying to bring it all out at once and tripping over something.

“Is... Is this all...” Lyse hardly knew how to ask the question, but if she recognized all these items like she thought she did, this was a tremendously strange situation. “Why do you have so many of Qatora's things?!”

Had it only been clothing, Lyse could have accepted the crossdressing theory. She'd been a bit disgusted at first, but since Sidis loved and accepted everything about her, she thought she could try to do the same for him. But the longer she looked, the more familiar the clothes became to her eyes. Moreover, they weren't Sidis's size. But the well-loved swords, the desk and chair, and the necklace her mother had given her... Lyse had forgotten all about them. They were all hers—Qatora's—long ago.

“Um, after you died...they first gifted me that knife,” Sidis explained, head

down. “Once I was well enough to be up and about, I visited your house, I just couldn’t let go of your sword when I saw it...so they gifted that to me too.”

Sidis’s excuse was thus: after a year of bed rest, he’d started going to Qatora’s family home out of a desire to feel close to her. Every time he visited, her parents felt so badly for the young grieving boy that they gifted him another memento—her handkerchief, letter opener, and so on.

“I didn’t ask for the dresses, though! Honestly! It’s just... Before your father passed, he said that he knew he couldn’t keep them forever, yet he still didn’t want to get rid of them...so he offered them to me...”

“And the desk?” Surely there was no way her parents had given him that as a memento too.

“After your father passed, your family finally decided to do something about your old furniture. Your brother asked me about it, and I told him that I’d take it if he was just going to get rid of it...”

Lyse really didn’t know how to feel about this. Hadn’t her family given Sidis *too much* to remember her by? She could understand the smaller keepsakes, but her diary? That was utterly embarrassing, but since it was mostly filled with stories from work, she could deal with it. Her relatives had probably already read it all by then.

Still, Lyse couldn’t understand why her family had given Sidis her clothing. The dresses could have gone to other ladies as hand-me-downs. And no one in their right mind would want a worthless old desk and chair, yet they’d pawned them off on Sidis...

“Was my family using you as a way to get rid of my old things?” she had to ask. Furniture made for a curious gift. Normally, it would have gone straight to a secondhand store. Had they offered it to Sidis because they knew he’d never be able to bear throwing it out?

Sidis looked humiliated, shrinking further. “I’m sure they asked for my sake, not theirs,” he admitted.

“What do you mean?”

Incredibly hesitant, he confessed, “Um...I used to sit at that desk in your room

and think of you, or look at your uniform and cry...”

“...I’m so sorry for asking,” Lyse apologized. It was hard for any man to admit to crying—even as a child.

In Sidis’s case, however, he’d had the personal horror of watching someone he loved die right in front of him. It was no wonder he got teary-eyed when he saw her old clothes, even after they’d been given to him. Thinking about it like that...Lyse came to realize just how much she’d meant to Sidis in her past life.

“I’m honored you’ve thought of me for so long.” She’d been surprised and baffled at first, but after hearing the whole story, she now understood how profound his grief had been.

Hearing what Lyse said, Sidis finally looked at her in relief. “Thank you...but I don’t think I have any reason to keep Qatora’s things any longer. I have you now, after all. Would you be all right if I got rid of them?”

“Of course,” she replied. If Sidis no longer had a use for them, they’d served their purpose. “This stuff is all over a century old, so I doubt anyone would want it. Dispose of it however you’d like. I’d honestly thought it was all long gone anyway.”

Sidis nodded back at her. Lyse then took the opportunity to say goodbye to all of her old belongings that had helped Sidis through his grief in her place. She was happy that he was willing to let go of Qatora and focus on Lyse.

After talking a bit more about the past, Sidis and Lyse returned to the matter of their engagement. Even after learning of the night’s incident, there was a chance that the rest of the imperial family would continue to insist on the couple taking other partners in the name of spreading the Light.

“I really think our only way out of this is for me to get stronger,” Lyse insisted. “So I want to learn to use magic quickly. Once I can do that, we’ll have no reason to heed their other demands, even regarding the Light of Origin.”

The imperial family had first objected to her engagement to Sidis because she could defend herself with naught but a sword. So as long as Lyse could learn to use magic, that would silence the majority of their complaints. They’d be forced to acknowledge her.

“Let’s do this, then... We can apologize for the rumors and say that you’d like to practice magic until they quiet down. We can probably buy ourselves two or three months that way. You’ll need to learn how to use magic in that time.”

“So be it.”

The next day, Sidis brought Lyse with him to the imperial family meeting. He was criticized for what he’d rushed into the night before, of course, but they successfully managed to defer the topic of marriage in favor of Lyse training in the ways of magic. All was going according to plan, except...

“Why don’t we have Karl teach her magic?” suggested Kirstin.

Chapter 3: The Lady-in-Waiting Starts Learning Magic

“You want Karl to teach her?” the emperor groaned, looking a bit fed up with his sister.

It seemed last night’s events hadn’t been enough to deter her. Even Lyse could see through Kirstin’s ploy—she wanted her son and Lyse to get closer via magic lessons.

Kirstin, on her part, explained as though it were only obvious: “Everyone present knows that Karl has little mana himself. That makes him the perfect instructor for Miss Lyse, since she cannot use hers.”

“Really...?”

“It was suggested at yesterday’s meeting that the Light is different from mana, which might be why Miss Lyse cannot use magic. By the same token, the odds of the Light being passed on to the next generation are hypothetically low.”

Hearing this, Lyse realized the little white lie Sidis and the emperor had fed the rest of the imperial family in an attempt to quash the idea of spreading the Light of Origin to more children.

“But we don’t know any of this for certain. You said yourself that it was only a theory, Your Majesty,” Kirstin continued. “So I hit on the idea that maybe it’s just *difficult* to use the Light as mana. And if that’s the case, would it not be appropriate to regard Light bearers the same way we do imperials with weak mana?”

The other members of the imperial family nodded in agreement at this notion. The emperor’s retinue had no way of refuting it either, since they themselves had couched their own knowledge in mere theoretical terms. Seeing this reaction seemed to encourage Kirstin, her expression now brighter than it had been before.

“Furthermore, Karl is researching magical techniques. Perhaps he might even discover a way for Miss Lyse to use magic. That’s another reason I’d like them to work together—so that he can observe her. What does everyone think?”

Most of the other family members concurred that it would be worthwhile. One of them spoke up, “If Miss Lyse is going to begin magic training, what exactly will her status here in the palace be? The announcement of her engagement to Prince Sidis will have to be put on hold... Deferred, that is. Should she prove unable to use magic at all, we’ll need to hold another meeting on the subject of whether she should remain here Prince Sidis’s fiancée.”

Lyse thought for a moment that he was worried about her, but that wasn’t the case. If she remained Sidis’s fiancée publicly, this man was mostly concerned about what would happen if she ended up marrying someone else. In other words, he was suggesting that Lyse stay at the imperial palace as something *other* than Sidis’s bride-to-be.

The majority of the imperial family nodded along, seeming to agree with this. Lyse now completely understood why Sidis had pulled such a stunt the previous night. If this was what the rest of the imperial family was like, he and the emperor were going to have an awful time changing their minds.

“That’s true. If we’re postponing the engagement announcement until we find out if Miss Lyse can use magic, we should come up with a reason for the postponement. I’ve heard about what happened last night, but... This way, any rumors should have time to die down,” another female family member said, agreeing in a somewhat neutral way.

“I don’t think we need a reason for postponing,” Sidis piped up unhappily.

Alcede patted his friend’s shoulder with a suggestion in mind. “Oh, Sidis. I’ve got an idea then. Why don’t we have Miss Lyse stay in the palace as a lady-in-waiting to His Majesty, just as she was in Olwen? Since she’s a foreigner, we could frame the appointment as a way for her to learn imperial etiquette and such. That would give us a natural reason to postpone announcing your engagement for the time being,” he explained before whispering to Sidis that Lyse would still remain his fiancée that way.

“In the first place, asking a lady who came here as Sidis’s fiancée to suddenly

fill a different role would be far too odd. Would it not be best for Miss Lyse to agree to a compromise like this instead?" Alcede continued, a wicked grin on his face. "If she's just studying etiquette, Miss Lyse getting stolen away by another gentleman would seem like the natural conclusion of a passionate affair rather than something forced. And should that happen, we'll never even have to announce that she was engaged to Sidis."

I'd never do that with anyone else, though...

The idea of marrying someone other than Sidis was out of the question for Lyse, but she kept her objections to herself. She knew Alcede was only suggesting such a thing to convince the other imperial family members. And sure enough, even those who were against her engagement to Sidis in the first place began nodding.

And so, it was decided that Kirstin's son Karl would teach Lyse. Nevertheless, it was mission success: the matter of her engagement was off the table while she studied magic. Since she needed time to devote to practice, the imperial family agreed to restrict her lady-in-waiting-duties-slash-etiquette-training to the morning hours.

As such, Lyse's work and practice began the next day. She woke up a little earlier than usual in the morning and leisurely enjoyed the breakfast prepared for her. Food was much more plentiful in the Razanate Empire than Olwen. The lands here were fertile, and the nobles who managed the chain of supply could use magic. Harvested food was resistant to damage from both heat and the cold, and since the empire had a stable economy, there were few thieves who targeted provisions.

After breakfast, Lyse changed into a dress and went to see the emperor. After exchanging morning greetings, they reviewed his plans for the day. The head lady-in-waiting would read off the schedule, and the other ladies-and-waiting would divide the various jobs amongst themselves.

If there was a party to be held, for example, they would write the invitations. Most of the emperor's errands were handled by his chamberlains, but if a woman or personal matters were involved, a lady-in-waiting would often be sent instead. Charity work in the emperor's name, mostly for children orphaned

by monster battles, could also be performed by a lady-in-waiting.

And in the event there wasn't much to do on any given day, His Majesty's ladies-in-waiting were free to pursue ladylike hobbies or devote themselves to socializing. The trouble was...Lyse was having a hard time pretending that she didn't already know all of this.

"Oh my, Miss Lyse. You already knew that too? You have such a wonderful memory."

While she was casually chatting with another lady-in-waiting who was showing her around the garden, Lyse accidentally mentioned something about a flower that had once bloomed there. And when she knew the palace practices for when the bell tower rang before anyone told her about them, her fellow ladies-in-waiting all smiled like they were witnessing something charming.

"Prince Sidis must have told you absolutely everything about palace life in great detail. He must be positively beside himself."

Lyse had tried to explain away all her foreknowledge by smiling and saying that she'd heard about things from Sidis. She felt bad each and every time, and the fact that the other ladies were now fawning over her innocent romance was so embarrassing that she had to stop herself from running away. She only had herself to blame for getting so caught up in nostalgia that she ran off at the mouth, so she discreetly pinched the back of her hand hard to keep it from happening again.

Later that morning, when the emperor left for his daily meeting, the ladies-in-waiting put in practice with their swordplay and magic. This was a responsibly expected of them every day without fail. Since monsters could assail the palace at any time, it was important that they remain in top form to protect both the emperor and themselves.

As for Lyse, who was finally allowed to take part in sword training... She was having a grand old time.

Ah, this takes me back! What fun!

Here, she could openly swing a sword to heart's content, and she even had people who were willing to spar with her. She was so happy she wanted to

throw her arms up into the air with glee, but she held herself back. Instead, she delighted in seeing all of the beautiful and well-mannered daughters of earls and barons swinging their own swords as if it were perfectly natural. Just thinking about how she fit in here made Lyse feel like she was settling in comfortably.

“You’re quite talented, Miss Lyse,” complimented Irina, a baron’s daughter who’d been serving as one of the emperor’s ladies-in-waiting for a year. She was quite talented with a blade herself. She was probably good enough to beat a knight from Olwen.

“I’m so glad to have met someone strong like you, Miss Irina!” cried Lyse, spilling her heart out in excitement. “I’ve always loved the sword for some reason, but it was forbidden to the ladies of Olwen. Just being able to train like this is enough to move me to tears...”

Irina laughed when she saw Lyse tear up for real. “I’ve heard that it’s rare for ladies in other countries to wield swords, but to think it’s really true... I imagine it’s probably because they’ve never had much occasion to fight, though that must have been hard on you given your love of the sword. Coming to the empire must have given you something to look forward to, then.”

“I was so excited to learn that I’d be able to train with a blade every day!”

Seeing Lyse swing her sword with childlike enthusiasm made all of the other ladies smile. She was a bit embarrassed by it, but her continued joy over being able to practice her swordplay won out in the end. After finishing up sword training for the day, the ladies had lunch and chatted over tea. Once that was over, it was finally time for Lyse’s first magic lesson.

“I wonder what Lord Karl is like...”

Lyse had now made her way to the corner of the front garden near the palace wall—the designated meeting place for magic training sessions. Since it was only a short way away from the palace’s right wing, she could easily see the pillar of the Light of Origin on the other side of the trees. The Light was separated from the palace by the northern garden and the villa where Lyse had lost her previous life. She hadn’t been there yet, but she was sure she’d see it in time.

As for why she was here today, however, she found herself wondering about Karl. Had he devoted himself to magical research out of scorn for his lack of mana, or had he taken to it in an earnest attempt to uncover his potential? The answer to that question would likely determine how pleasant their encounter would be.

Based on what Lyse had gathered from Sidis, Karl physically only looked about seventeen years old and had a meek personality. There weren't any rumors of him being unsociable. Rather, it seemed he was a gentle boy who worried for his mother. *"He's not a bad kid. But...I'd simply prefer that you two didn't get close, if possible,"* Sidis had said, a bit blue as he looked away. He wasn't proud of being jealous of someone nearly a hundred years his junior. Lyse had felt a little bashful when he acted like he didn't want anyone else to have her.

While she turned all this over in her mind as she waited, she finally heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the hedge. They belonged to someone who wasn't all that tall—probably between Lyse's and Sidis's height. When Lyse saw him, he was wearing slightly luxurious clothing befitting a nobleman, but had it covered with a russet hooded cloak. It struck her as odd. Why was he wearing a hood when it was warm out? Did he get cold easily? Regardless, Lyse presumed this was probably Karl Lasuarl.

Behind him stood a tall attendant with black hair. He had a sword on his hip and was wearing a blue jacket with a stand-up collar. Since it was different from the uniform the imperial knights wore, however, Lyse presumed him to be Karl's personal guard.

"I-I'm sorry to have kept you waiting..." the hooded man greeted her, a palpable nervousness in his voice. "Are you Miss Lyse?"

She nodded in response, and the cloaked man promptly bowed.

"I am Karl Lasuarl...and I'll be teaching you magic. It's nice to meet you..." he said in a quiet, uncertain voice.

Seeming to think that it would be rude to keep his hood up after introducing himself, he reached up to pull it back...and Lyse gasped at what she saw.

He looks just like Lord Sidis as a boy—only bigger! How cute!

Though the contours of his face were somewhat angular, there was yet a childlike roundness to it. He was so cute that Lyse could imagine how people must have compared him to a doll when he was younger. He was just that adorable. His smoky blond hair and his clear blue eyes were the very picture of innocence, and Lyse felt them tug at her heart like she was facing a child. She just wanted to feed him sweets and protect him.

“B-Behind me is my attendant, Lawry,” Karl continued. “You’ll be seeing more of him.”

“It’s an honor to meet both of you. I’m looking forward to learning from you, Lord Karl,” Lyse replied, realizing she shouldn’t keep spacing out.

After the introductions were over, Karl let out a relieved sigh before asking, “I’ve heard that you’ve already been taught some of the basics... Would you be able to tell me what you’ve learned so far?” Perhaps because he was finally talking about something familiar to him, he sounded much more assured than he had before.

“Um, that having the necessary imagination and the belief that you can materialize it are important in expressing your mana.”

It was easy for Lyse to imagine herself using magic since she’d been able to use it in her past life. Hypothetically all she needed to do was remember...but that hadn’t cut it.

“After that, Lord Sidis tried many times to show me how to draw out my mana, but we could never get to the next stage...”

“But you did feel your...mana itself, didn’t you?” Karl asked in an indirect way. Lawry could hear them, after all. He’d probably meant, “*If you only have the Light within you, it seems as if it could be used in place of mana.*” But since Lyse’s Light was confidential to the imperial family, Karl couldn’t say as much out loud—even in front of his own attendant.

“That’s right,” Lyse answered with a nod.

At this, Karl crossed his arms and lowered his head to think. Lyse patiently awaited a response. He eventually spoke up again, his eyes still cast downward: “Um, if you’ve done that to bring your mana out, then could I...”

“Certainly,” Lyse replied, casually holding both arms out toward him. Since she wanted to learn as fast as possible, she thought it would be best to get straight to the point.

“Eek!” Karl frightfully jumped back a step before hesitantly reaching for her wrists. He seemed rather shy about touching a woman.

If he was this reluctant to even touch Lyse’s hand, she had to wonder why he’d accepted the job of becoming her magic tutor. As she pondered the answer, it suddenly hit her. *Of course*. His mother had likely convinced him that, if this went well, marrying Lyse would mean more mana for the next generation of the Lasuarl family.

Karl was still slowly—oh-so slowly—reaching toward Lyse while blushing beet red. The longer he took, the more embarrassed Lyse herself became. On the plus side, however, she started to feel like she wouldn’t have to be too apprehensive around him. If he was this bashful about touching a woman, she felt he’d never force her into anything. Their magic lessons might end up rather amicable.

But as Lyse was entertaining that pleasant thought, a third party intervened and grabbed Karl’s arm...



“Huh?”

And just like that, he pulled Karl’s hand to Lyse’s. This third party was none other than Lawry, who had kept his distance until now. He’d somehow managed to sneak up on them, and was now forcefully tugging on his master’s arm with a grin.

“You mustn’t leave a lady waiting, Lord Karl,” he warned the boy before turning to Lyse with a sweet smile. “Please forgive him, Miss Lyse. The young master isn’t the best with the ladies. That is why the duchess herself has asked me to accompany him. You must be tired, having to hold your arms out like that.”

“No, I’m quite all right like this for a few minutes...”

She understood that he was trying to be courteous, but his face was far too close. He was leaning in as he spoke. It wasn’t proper for a man to get so up close and personal with a betrothed woman.

When Lyse turned her face away, Karl scolded his attendant. “Lawry, back off.”

“My apologies for overstepping,” he replied, quietly following orders without any change in expression.

Had he really moved out of worry for his master? Lyse thought he’d been rather rough for someone concerned about Karl. It actually seemed incredibly rude, but Karl immediately moved on. As such, Lyse kept her thoughts to herself for the time being and tried to focus on her magic lesson.

“All right... I’m going to draw out your mana,” he said. Now that he had a hold of Lyse’s hand, he seemed to be all right. He closed his eyes and tried to draw Lyse’s mana to where their hands met without a problem. It seemed he was trying to be gentle, as all she felt was something as thin as thread slowly being pulled away from her. “Do you feel that?”

Lyse nodded. This much was exactly like what Lyse remembered from her past life. She could feel the flow of her mana.

“Now give it a try for yourself,” he said. “Just...with a different method than

what you've been trying this far."

"A different method?" Lyse could hear the unspoken words, *"Since what you're doing isn't working."*

Seeing her blank stare, however, Karl let go of her hand and explained, "The usual method is to concentrate your mana in your palm and imagine it like a ball... That's generally doable for imperial nobility." His brow furrowed a bit. "If you aren't quite used to mana...then I believe it might be better for you to focus on a part of your body too. Perhaps...try imagining taking that string of mana we pulled out and wrapping it around a single finger, then making it light up."

At his weak encouragement, Lyse nodded. Karl was much more knowledgeable about the ways of magic than she was, so she had no problem following his advice and doing as he suggested.

"All right."

Closing her eyes, she imagined her mana gathering in her palm before sending a thread of it through her hand to wrap around her index finger. She wrapped it once, then twice...and the more she did it, the stronger it became until, at last, it started glowing. Struck by the sudden feeling that something had happened, Lyse opened her eyes to see it for herself.

"You did it," Karl said, looking relieved as he observed her faintly glowing finger.

"It... It lit up..." Lyse couldn't help gasping. In all the time Sidis had been trying to teach her to use magic, she'd never been able to produce anything like this.

"It seems my theory worked out nicely... There's no doubt that you have mana. From now on, let's try to strengthen your ability to control it bit by bit...until you can use magic normally. Give practicing it a try," said Karl with a soft, angelic smile. He must have been relieved to see her succeed in the first step of learning to use magic. It would have stumped even him to hit a wall here.

Lyse, meanwhile, found herself filled with hope. The idea that she'd be able to use magic after all was exhilarating. "Thank you so much, Lord Karl!" she

exclaimed, grabbing his hand out of glee.

“W-Wah! N-No, Miss Lyse, thank you!” he yelped, shaking her off and jumping back. “S-See you tomorrow!” And with that stiff goodbye, he fled.

Lyse was worried that she’d done something weird without thinking.

Lawry, who’d remained behind, bowed to her and said, “I apologize for my lord’s rudeness. He has had little contact with the fairer sex, and seems to be a touch too conscious of you after learning that you may wed. Please forgive him.”

So that was the reason... Deciding she’d need to tread carefully so as not to scare Karl away, Lyse asked Lawry to pass on a message for her.

“I’m very grateful to have such a knowledgeable magic tutor,” she said. “Please tell him that.”

Magic felt like it was finally within her grasp. She couldn’t bear the thought of her teacher abandoning her so soon.

“Worry not. Even if my lord cannot handle it, I shall instruct you in the ways of magic and serve as your practice partner.”

“Th-Thank you?” Lyse stammered, internally muttering about how that *wasn’t* what she wanted.

She’d meant to apologize to Karl, not to suggest that she’d be happy with just any knowledgeable tutor. As such, she was a little put off by Lawry’s reply. Something bothered her about it, though she couldn’t quite articulate what.

“Whatever the case, please inform Lord Karl that I would like to continue our lessons,” she reiterated, putting a swift end to the conversation.

Despite her worries, however, Karl showed up at the designated spot in the garden all the same the next day.

“I-I’m terribly sorry about yesterday,” he apologized timidly.

As for Lyse, she was just happy to know that she hadn’t upset him enough to chase him off for good.

“You have nothing to worry about, Lord Karl,” she assured him. “Now, what

will we be practicing today?”

“Next, we’ll try something similar to normal practice... Focus the mana you’ve wrapped around your finger onto the tip, and then try to light it up...”

Doing just as he instructed, Lyse was able to make her fingertip glow again. After practicing that for the day, they moved on to the next step the following day.

“Now pull your mana a tiny bit away from your finger and light it up,” Karl instructed.

Today, Lyse imagined the thread of her mana leaving her finger and rolling into a little ball next to it, but...

“It’s not working...”

Try as she might, it wouldn’t light up. Everything had been going so well up until this point, so it was rather disheartening.

Nearly glaring at her finger, Karl muttered, “Why...? You have the Light of Origin...” He grimaced in frustration.

Lyse felt bad. She was worried that Karl was blaming himself for her failure.

Suddenly lifting his head, Karl took Lyse’s hand. “For now, please keep practicing what we’ve been doing... Practice it over and over! I’ll think up a way to get through this! I promise I’ll find a way for you to use magic!” he exclaimed.

“O-Okay...” A bit overwhelmed by his sudden strong-willed declaration, Lyse nodded back.

From a short distance away, Lawry cheered, “Yes, that’s it, Lord Karl!”

Lyse didn’t care to think about why he was cheering exactly, but it seemed to encourage Karl a bit, because he nodded back at his attendant.

After that, Lyse diligently kept practicing as promised. Karl hadn’t given up yet, so she wouldn’t either. Even when Sidis came to visit her that evening, she talked about the day’s lesson while practicing. She kept at it all the way up until she retired for the night.

Unfortunately, however, she still couldn’t manage what Karl had asked her to

do—not that day or the day after. He kept telling her not to be impatient, but it depressed Lyse to think that she'd stagnated on her path to magic.

The next day, Sidis went to the imperial villa to do his rounds. Shortly after the emperor's retinue returned from Olwen, someone had attempted to break in there. Thanks to that, Sidis was now patrolling the grounds every other day.

The intruder hadn't been a member of the imperial family, of course. According to the knight that had pursued them, however, they were dressed like an imperial noble—but hadn't used any magic. Both Sidis and the emperor suspected that it may have been a member of the Donan Faith. A black stone would explain how they'd been able to get onto the property, but at the present, no one knew what the intruder's intended goal was. Nothing had been stolen, and there were no other suspicious figures lurking about. And, of course, the Light of Origin was unaffected.

But thanks to his frequent patrols, Sidis hadn't been able to spend as much time with Lyse. If not for his duties, he'd be with her more... But given what was at stake if something should happen to the Light, he knew he couldn't shirk his responsibilities.

"Still, I don't think there would be any variations in the Light if something small happened," he muttered to himself.

The Light of Origin was a special, highly concentrated pillar of pure mana that was strong enough to kill anyone who got too close, after all. It hadn't shown any fluctuations a century ago after sucking up a sword made of the Donan Faith's black stone. Nothing ever happened when monsters occasionally jumped straight into it, either. Sidis doubted anything could harm it.

As he approached the building, he greeted the knights standing out front. "Any changes?" he asked.

"None today, Your Highness. We've already increased the guard since yesterday."

"Good work."

After thanking the men on duty, Sidis then entered the villa of pure white

pillars and seamless walls. Everything here had been with magic. Normal builders were unable to get anywhere near the Light of Origin, so the imperial family of old had used magic to construct the villa around it.

Close proximity to the Light would wear away at a normal person's health, so magical measures had also been put in place to mitigate that effect. This allowed even foreigners to visit the palace for a few days at a time without suffering any ill. But the effect at the villa, which housed the Light itself, was too strong to be contained. It was just that powerful.

As such, though it was customary for members of the imperial family to spend time at the villa, they couldn't bring servants with them. Because of this, it fell upon the visiting ladies-in-waiting, knights, and imperial family members to keep the place clean. The emperor actually quite liked wiping the windows, while Sidis enjoyed mopping the floor in a meandering fashion. Perhaps because of her precise nature, Kirstin would volunteer to polish the silverware.

"Now that I think about it, Kirstin could never handle being in the villa for long, could she...?" Sidis recalled.

The previous emperor had two children, Egbert and Kirstin. The latter could use magic and even fight to an extent. She'd never had a problem thanks to that, but her mana was considered low for a member of the imperial family. Though she could enter the villa, she'd only been able to stay for two days as a girl. After she grew, however, she worked up to a week at a time.

"That was probably the reason why Her Majesty took care of me."

Under ordinary circumstances, noble children who lost their mothers to natural causes were taken care of by their nannies. Sidis, however, had been taken in by the emperor and empress because of Kirstin. She should have been next in line for the throne should anything happen to Egbert, but the role of empress was far too great a burden for someone with so little mana. The other nobles would never take her seriously, thus crippling her power. The empire prized nothing more than strength in the fight against monsters, after all.

That was why the former emperor and empress had adopted Sidis as their own—so that there would be another strong candidate for the throne in the worst case scenario. And so they'd raised him like an imperial prince. At the

time, he was essentially a backup for Egbert...although circumstances were a bit different now.

“Lyse might have a more peaceful life if she can’t use magic...” Sidis sighed.

As long as Lyse could fight with a sword and magic, no one would object to her marrying Sidis. But if it came out that they both possessed the Light of Origin within them, people may call for a change in emperor. Even without that, however, there were those who wished to see Sidis on the throne. He’d heard it before: *“The throne should belong to the one special enough to possess the Light of Origin.”* Lyse’s power would only give them the incentive they needed to push harder. Sidis had broached this concern with Alcede and the emperor back in Olwen, but...

“But then His Majesty went off about how he’d give up the throne for an easier life...”

Sidis also didn’t want people talking about Lyse behind her back for marrying him when she *couldn’t* use magic. They’d finally been reunited after all this time, and he was loath to make her life here in old home country hard. He’d brought her back to the empire to protect her, not to put her through hell.

“Still, it’s not like I can just grant her the power of magic myself...”

And even if she did learn to use it, they’d need to keep her Light a secret. Sidis pondered over this as he walked the villa grounds. He searched all three floors and even the roof, but nothing was out of place. He thus descended back to the ground floor and headed toward the Light itself.

The pillar of the Light of Origin was as thick as a giant tree that would take ten men to surround, and its pearls of radiance rose endlessly into the heavens above. At its base was a kind of crystallized white stone that ran the ground for about ten paces before turning into short grass. Another thirty paces from there was the entrance to the villa, which was built in a semicircle around the Light of Origin.

Being so close was enough for even Sidis to feel its intense presence. Though the Light was made by magic, it felt like no other spell. It was a coalescence of mana further purified by magic, and it was said that it pulled energy from the earth to scatter it across the land in a fertile blessing. Sidis didn’t really know

the truth, however.

All he knew from the brief peek he'd gotten via Lyse was that the Light of Origin was a magical construct. Its original purpose was to heal the ruined land, but that shouldn't have generated a pillar of light like this. Though it had fulfilled its purpose and revitalized the soil, it must have entangled with some other power at the time of its casting that warped it.

But even so, the Razanate Empire treasured the Light for a reason. Its founders were the children of exiles banished from another country. So even if it meant battling monsters, they'd had no choice but to settle here. The fact that they gained mana because of it was an unintended side effect—happenstance that needed to be kept secret from other countries. That was how they'd come to deify it as the Light of Origin.

Just touching the Light hadn't told Sidis that much; it was merely a theory based on a collection of old documents. And neither Sidis nor the emperor, who'd shared it with him, had any intention of making it public. There was no good to be had from revealing it after all this time.

"But declining mana, huh...?"

As long as the imperials lived in this land, their fight with the monsters would continue. As such, the matter of declining mana was a serious issue—and it was precisely for that reason that the rest of the imperial family wanted Sidis and Lyse to marry other people. Perhaps they'd mistakenly presumed that he wanted to marry Lyse *for* her Light.

"That's not it, though..."

Whenever Sidis approached the Light, he remembered Qatora pulling him away from it to save his life. She'd blamed herself for his capture, as Sidis had been taken hostage that day on his way to see her. He'd tortured himself for years over making her feel that way, so it pained him to look at the Light and think of her final moments. He'd long sworn to himself that he'd never make anyone feel that way again.

But today, when Sidis gazed upon the Light, he felt at peace. That was because he'd now met Lyse, who'd told him that not only was Qatora proud to save his life, but that sacrificing her own hadn't been painful. Lyse told Sidis that

being swallowed by the Light was just like falling into a nice nap, and Lyse was a terrible liar. He would have known if she was making it up just to make him feel better.

“Qatora was an honest person too...”

Whenever she’d said something she didn’t actually mean, her brows would tense into a frightening expression. That was why he and the emperor had always believed her when she smiled and said that she wasn’t mad, or that she loved them. After leading a completely different life, Lyse was no longer Qatora exactly, but her nature was largely unchanged—likely because they shared a soul.

After looking at the Light for a while, Sidis departed the villa. He finally had some time to himself today after finishing up his patrol, meaning he could go see Lyse during daylight hours for a change. Before today, he’d been wrapped up in tending to his ducal duties and taking visitors. He’d also been running into battle against monsters attacking the capital. Things were unusually busy. Though he’d been out of the country for a while in Olwen, he hadn’t expected to return to this much work.

“No... They’re just trying to get in my way.”

Mainly, he meant Kirstin and the other members of the imperial family who agreed with her. They were probably why he’d been hit with excessive visitors and patrol requests recently. Karl was teaching Lyse magic now, and Kirstin intended for the two of them to get closer that way. Sidis initially hadn’t thought it would sway Lyse...but he’d grown worried as of late. After first meeting Karl, Lyse had blushing told Sidis that she couldn’t believe how cute he was. Meeting a weak, younger-looking man had apparently stirred her protective instincts.

“Now that I think about it, she *did* always love things she could protect...”

The entire reason Qatora had become a knight was because she liked being a guardian. Sidis could only imagine that she’d been so patient and loving with him and the emperor because she saw them as her personal charges.

But as Lyse was now, the imperials saw both her and Karl as weak. The entire palace thought of her as someone in need of protection because she couldn’t

use magic. Lyse had no intention of staying that way, however. She still wanted to be the one doing the protecting—and that troubled Sidis. He was afraid she might agree to marry Karl in order to be his lifelong protector.

“No, that would never happen. I’m worried about nothing...”

Or so Sidis whispered, but in spite of himself, he went to spy on Lyse’s magic practice...and what he saw struck him silent. He reflexively bit his lip and looked away, for Lyse was talking to Karl—who wasn’t much taller than her—with a sweet smile on her face. Worse yet, their hands were linked.

Sidis couldn’t bear to watch. He knew that holding hands was integral to feeling someone else’s mana. He also knew that Lyse smiled that way at all children and small animals. But even so, he couldn’t stop himself from getting jealous.

In order to get his feelings under control, Sidis headed back to the villa to be alone. The knights guarding the entrance gave him a funny look, but they let him through without a word. Sidis was effectively the caretaker of the villa and the Light of Origin, after all.

Once he was in, Sidis crouched down near the Light, his hands on his knees.

“Damn it... I wish I was weak too!”

If he were, then Lyse would be looking at him that way instead of Karl. Sidis was a grown man now. Lyse wasn’t going to affectionately fawn over him, and somehow, that bothered him.

Sidis vented his true feelings now that he was alone, throwing his fist to the ground...and the moment he hit the white crystal sheet, it cracked with a sharp noise. He lifted his head to see his face in the cracked crystal, and a thought occurred to him... If he were a little animal, Lyse would dote on him and no one would get in his way when he went to see her at night.

“If only I were a kitten or something...”

The second he said that, crystals floated up like smoke before his eyes.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed, turning away. He then felt something misty touch his cheek...but that was all. A wave of relief washed over him, and then fabric of

some kind fell over his face. “Wha?!”

What had just happened? Sidis quickly scrambled away from the fabric and looked back. He didn’t see anyone there, but something else very strange caught his attention... The villa looked much bigger than usual.

His field of view was also startlingly low. He thought it was because he was on his knees, but it didn’t change when he stood up. The pièce de résistance, however, was the pile of clothes—complete with a cape—that was sitting in front of him as though they’d fallen off of someone. The color of the fabric and decorations looked extremely familiar...

“Wait, these are...”

They were his clothes, now lying on the ground like he’d shed them. When he stopped to think about his altered field of vision, the only conclusion he could come to was that he’d shrunk somehow. But despite now being naked, he wasn’t cold. Desperate to figure out what had happened, Sidis set off in search of a mirror.

He headed toward his personal room in the villa. His strides were so tiny that he felt like he was barely gaining any ground, but along the way, he spotted a door that had been left open. Inside the room were a number of piled-up boxes, so he figured that someone must have forgotten to close the door after dropping off some supplies or luggage.

Sidis went to shut it...but had to give up. He couldn’t reach the doorknob. Stranger yet, when he looked at his hand...it was covered in fluffy fur.

“Why is my hand...”

I need to get a look at myself.

With that thought in mind, Sidis moved to the closest window of appropriate height. It faced a line of trees, leaving it dark and reflective like a mirror. And looking into it, Sidis finally saw what had happened to him.

“A cat...?”

Indeed, he’d become a pure white, green-eyed cat.

That day, Lyse was again practicing making her mana glow.

“It’s...not working...”

Alas, the results were still the same. She could now make not just her finger, but her entire hand glow...yet anything beyond that was failing her. The instant she moved her mana even the slightest bit away from her body, it ceased to glow.

“But you can make water! That’s major progress!” Karl insisted.

Forcing a smile, Lyse generated enough moisture to drip from her fingertip like rainwater off a leaf. Karl was doing his best to encourage her, but he still looked rather glum—Lyse understood why. It was mere consolation. They hadn’t yet successfully managed the first step to magic. The spell she’d used just now *should* have formed a ball of water in her palm.

I’m really awful at this...

Unable to keep up the cheerful act anymore, Lyse cast her eyes downward. At this rate, she was only going to end up depressing Karl further. She was even starting to think that she should give up on magic altogether.

“Miss Lyse, why not try using magic on someone you’re touching directly?” Lawry suggested out of the blue, taking a few steps closer from where he’d silently been observing thus far.

“Someone she’s touching? You mean healing magic?” Karl asked before Lyse had the chance.

“Indeed I do, Lord Karl. From what I’ve seen, Miss Lyse cannot move her mana outside her body at all. But if you were to draw it out while touching her, is there not a chance she could use magic on something or someone she’s in contact with?”

“There is a chance, yes, but...” Despite agreeing that it was possible, Karl didn’t seem like he was interested in pursuing the lead.

“We must try all we can, Lord Karl. I’ve been feeling a bit useless just watching all this time, so allow me to help,” Lawry declared, reaching to unsheathe his sword.

Sensing he was about to try something, Lyse rushed to stop him. “P-Please stop, Sir Lawry! I’ll cut my own finger to test if I can use healing magic!” she begged, grabbing his sword hand to keep him from hurting himself.

“You don’t think desperation might drive you to new magical heights?” he asked rather plainly.

“I’d feel far too bad! Please don’t do this!” she frantically pleaded.

With this, he finally released his sword... But then he took Lyse’s hand instead.

“Huh?” She was struck by the suddenness of the gesture.

“I shall refrain if you’re so against it, Miss Lyse. I wouldn’t want to upset you,” he explained.

He looked rather sad and Lyse could only assume that he’d taken her hand apologetically. It would have been rude to pull away from him. But still, as a betrothed woman, it was inappropriate for her to hold hands with another man without good reason.

“As long as you understand,” Lyse said.

She then politely tried to withdraw her hand...but found that Lawry wouldn’t let go. She’d been in a similar situation once with her cousin, but this man wasn’t family. For him to insist on holding her so was quite a bother. And Karl, Lawry’s master, was off to the side spouting distressed sounds rather than actually ordering his attendant to back down. Lyse was going to have to use force. She imagined Lawry underestimated her, which would make the task easier. But just as she narrowed her eyes, estimating how best to attack...

Something white streaked by her.

“Ouch!”

“Huh?!”

It was a pure white cat, which had jumped between her and Lawry. It latched on to the attendant’s arm and kicked at it with its hind legs. Lawry thus let Lyse go, clutching his scratched left arm with his right. He then glared at the cat as Karl admonished him.

“Even that cat thought you were being rude. I’m terribly sorry, Miss Lyse.”

“It’s all right,” she replied, graciously accepting the apology. “I was a bit surprised, but I’m fine. Still, I beg you not to injure yourself.”

“Certainly. Um, let us call today’s lesson to an end here. I’ll think more about what steps to take next, h-healing magic included. Excuse us,” Karl said, leaving with Lawry in tow.

Lyse heaved a sigh, relieved that she hadn’t had to attack Lawry for his rudeness. It would have been impolite to beat down a lord’s attendant in front of him.

“You saved me, little one. Thank you,” Lyse said to the cat, who was still right beside her.

After looking up at her for a seemingly pensive moment, it silently rubbed up against her. She giggled at the soft tickling sensation of its fur against her feet poking out from the bottom hem of her dress. She then reached down and picked up the animal with a smile. It didn’t fight her at all, but rather settled into her arms.

“Are you someone’s pet? You don’t seem to have a collar...” Lyse mused as she scratched its chin. She was wondering if she’d be able to keep it.

Lord Sidis will still marry me, even if I don’t learn how to use magic... But if that happens, I’ll probably feel inferior here in the empire, just like he’s worried about.

There was a chance that no one would want to befriend the magicless wife of the crown prince. And if that inevitably happened, Lyse thought it might be nice to have a companion to live with... But first things first, she’d need to get permission to keep it inside the palace.

The former empress owned a dog, and I think I remember someone else having a cat... They might allow it.

Hurrying back to her room, Lyse asked Atoli as soon as she arrived and was pleased to receive a favorable response.

“A single cat should be fine. His Majesty has been talking about getting a dog

lately, and the former empress in the interior palace has a cat, so I don't believe it should be an issue. I'll gladly go check with His Majesty just to be sure."

About an hour later, Atoli returned with both permission and servants carrying various supplies.

"You're all set to own a cat now," she said.

"Thank you, Atoli."

"You're in a new land, after all. I hope you'll adjust to life here better with a companion at your side," said Atoli gently, bringing a smile to Lyse's face. "I think it'd be best to keep it inside your room until it learns that this is its home. Since it sneaked inside the palace somehow, it may wander off somewhere else never to be seen again if you let it."

That made good sense to Lyse, so she made sure the white cat couldn't get out of her room. It scratched at the door begging to go out a few times, but eventually gave up. When it didn't eat much of the cat food that had been prepared, Lyse began worrying that being cooped up was stressful for the little animal, but it freely drank water and ate the lightly seasoned offerings Lyse fed it from her own supper. When night came, she put it in its basket and set it on the table, but it slipped out and curled up on her pillow.

"Maybe it's more used to me than I thought... Be nice to me tomorrow too, okay, kitty? Oh, I should think of a name for you..." Lyse ran through a list of common cat names in the empire. "Mimi, Minmi... Wait, is it even a girl?"

Thinking she'd have to check tomorrow, Lyse slipped into a comfortable sleep, but...

The next morning, she woke up groaning uncomfortably. Opening her eyes, she could see the empty cat basket beside the window. What had become of the kitty? She wanted to turn and see if it was still sleeping next to her, but she couldn't move. A bit more awake now, she discovered that someone was holding her. There was an arm around her waist, and she went pale when she realized the warm sensation she could feel through her nightgown was another human's body heat.

"Wh— Huh, what...?!"

But try as she might, she couldn't shake off the bedroom intruder. When she struggled, it was like all her strength simply left her.

"Oh?" Lyse knew that there was only one person this happened with. "L-Lord Sidis...?"

Though she called his name, he didn't reply. Was he asleep? If this continued, she'd be stuck until he awoke on his own—which was an issue. Servants would eventually come calling to wake her, and if they found her in bed with Sidis...

"Wait, is he here on purpose?"

Lyse couldn't help but wonder. It hadn't been long since Sidis whisked her away to his room for the night in an attempt to prevent anyone from forcefully breaking off their engagement. Lyse had agreed to it at the time, but even so, they weren't married yet... They hadn't even had a formal engagement ceremony yet. It would be quite an ordeal if anyone saw them sleeping together.

Lyse had to wake him up. She tried smacking his arm and calling his name. "Lord Sidis, please, wake up!" Her quiet plea worked, as Sidis finally began to stir.



“Nnn...” She heard him groan behind her. It was a bit embarrassing. “Miss Lyse?”

It seemed he was still partially asleep, as he’d stopped calling her “Miss” in private company after they’d reaffirmed their wishes to marry one another. As he readjusted in his half-asleep stupor, he only tightened his grip around her further.

“Please wake up, Lord Sidis!”

“Just a little longer...” he whined, nuzzling his cheek against her head.

Blood rushed to her face. “I-I-It’s already morning! Um, if you don’t let me go soon, someone’s going to see us!”

“What...?”

With a quiet gasp, Sidis finally let go of her. Once she could move, she turned to look at him.

“Eek!” she squealed, immediately turning away again.

As the blanket moved, she could see that he was naked from the waist up. The sight shocked her into silence as Sidis himself began to panic.

“I-I’m so sorry! I’ll take care of this at once!”

“What? How?”

Without looking back, Lyse was puzzled. He must’ve been talking about putting his clothes on, but why had he sneaked into her bed shirtless in the first place?

While she was wondering, she heard him whisper, “Okay, you can turn around now, Lyse.”

She was suspicious at first. She hadn’t heard anything that sounded like him getting dressed. Was it really okay to look? Either way, they needed to talk and he needed to get out of her room ASAP. Thus she warily turned around, but...

Sidis was no longer on the bed. In his place was the white cat she’d found the day before.

“It’s me, Lyse,” it said in Sidis’s voice.

“...Lord Sidis?”

The cat nodded. “Yes. I happened to learn how to transform into a cat yesterday, and while I was walking around in cat form...you picked me up.”

So Lyse herself had brought him here.

“I tried to leave, but you and Atoli wouldn’t let me out of the room...”

“Urgh...” Lyse thought back to the day before when she’d dragged the cat away from the door while telling it to be a good kitty.

“I was going to leave when you fell asleep, but I wanted to watch you sleep for a bit, and ended up falling asleep myself... It seems the magic wore off overnight.”

“I see...”

In the end, this situation was partially Lyse’s fault. Still, she’d never dreamed that her pet cat might turn into her fiancé.

“I’ll take my leave, but...” As Sidis sat by the window, waiting for her to open it for him, he asked, “Could I come visit you as a cat again?”

The adorable way he cocked his head in cat form tickled Lyse, but she was still able to see the small animal as Sidis. Perhaps it was because his entreating feline eyes looked just like his human ones.

“I don’t mind,” she said with a smile. “And since I’ve already asked His Majesty for permission to keep a cat, it would be odd if it suddenly disappeared.”

At this, Sidis narrowed his eyes in a feline smile before departing. But when he reappeared in Lyse’s room later that night...Lyse realized a small problem.

“Welcome, L... Welcome home, kitty.”

She wasn’t supposed to be talking to Sidis; she was supposed to be talking to a cat. She quickly corrected herself so Atoli wouldn’t think anything strange.

“You haven’t thought of a name yet?” the lady-in-waiting asked, smiling in blissful ignorance.

“Er, um, I just can’t think of a good one...”

It would be hard for her to call Sidis by another name. Maybe the two of them could talk it over and come up with a proper catlike name for him. Lyse glanced over at Sidis, who was trying to behave in feline fashion by awkwardly licking his paws to clean his face.

“You must be hungry, kitty. Here’s some milk,” offered Atoli.

Sidis froze when he looked at the saucer of milk she placed on the floor. This exact scene had played out the night before. Cats are supposed to like milk, of course. But Lyse now understood his reluctance.

It’s pretty harsh to be ordered to drink out of a dish on the floor.

The cat was Sidis on the inside, after all. Lyse hadn’t known that yesterday, and it was difficult to push it on him now that she’d discovered the truth. Sidis looked up at her pleadingly.

Wh-What should I do...?

She couldn’t tell him to drink it anyway. She just couldn’t treat the prince like a house cat. But if she didn’t encourage him to drink it, it would seem strange to Atoli. Lyse could send her away, but she’d need a reason for that...

She seems like the type of person who’d give me my space if she thought I was upset and asked to have some alone time.

Lyse didn’t want to worry Atoli, but she couldn’t exactly tell her the cat was Sidis either.

His dignity is on the line here, right?

Lyse was always lenient with Sidis, but when she stopped to think about it, they were in this situation because *he* wanted to stay with her at night. He was being kind of—no, he was being overly clingy. After a great deal of thought, Lyse steeled her heart and walked up to him with a thin stick with a soft pom-pom attached.

“L-Let’s play, kitty!”

Her plan was to play with the cat so Atoli would think everything was fine and leave to go about her other duties. Sidis would just have to suck it up until then. This way, they could get more time alone together and talk about what to do

from here. She wasn't sure if Sidis grasped her intentions or not, but he got down low and started wiggling his tail.

"Get the ball!"

When Lyse started moving the stick, he followed the pom-pom with his eyes. After two or three passes, he tried to snag it with his front paws. But Lyse couldn't let him win yet, so she started moving it faster to keep it away from him. Sidis then tried to pounce on it.

Just as Lyse was starting to feel like she was playing with a real cat, someone came knocking at the door. Atoli answered it and began talking to someone, so Lyse assumed it was a messenger rather than a visitor, but...

"Oho, so this is the rumored cat."

In stepped the emperor himself.

"Y-Your Majesty!" Lyse nearly exclaimed, hurriedly rising to her feet as Sidis dashed under the sofa. He apparently didn't want the emperor to see him—much less see him playing like a cat.

"Sorry for bothering you. I just remembered that you'd said you got a cat, so I wanted to see it for myself, but..." he said, reaching under the couch.

Sidis swiftly retreated. Lyse didn't think the emperor would recognize Sidis in full-on feline form, but his fur was standing on end as he maintained distance.

After staring at the cat for a moment, the emperor suddenly smirked. "Atoli, would you make us some tea? I'd like to play with the cat for a while."

"Right away, Your Majesty."

After the lady-in-waiting stepped out to fetch tea, Emperor Egbert crossed his arms and grinned even wider. "Come now, Sidis," he said.

Sidis lowered himself closer to the floor, not even flinching when the emperor looked straight at him.

Egbert laughed. "You can't hide it from me. I know a thing or two about transforming into an animal. I can see just how artificial your movements are... Besides, you have *way* too much mana for a cat."

Though Sidis tried to keep up the act for a few moments even after being outed, he finally slumped his shoulders and swore under his breath. He then sat down like a human might. Seeing this, the emperor covered his mouth in an attempt to resist cackling. The sound of stifled laughter slipped his lips as he tried to keep quiet.

Sidis looked displeased. “Laugh all you want, Your Majesty.”

“Pfft! But if I let myself laugh—pfft—Atoli will notice something is wrong when she gets back. Ahaha, and it’d be such a waste to spoil such a hilarious joke so soon.”

“And here I was worried sick for you when you turned into a dog...”

Having finally gotten over his giggles, Emperor Egbert continued somewhat calmly, “I’m just happy that someone else is in my shoes, or at least something close to them. So, how is it? Isn’t it hard acting like an animal?” It sounded like he’d had his share of troubles when he was a dog.

“You certainly seemed to be enjoying yourself at the time, Your Majesty.”

Lyse thought the same thing. Back then, the emperor had appeared to enjoy seeing everyone panic over his transformation. Alcede had been the only one to keep his cool.

“I knew there was a way to turn back, so I never let it get to me. Still, I was a bit reluctant to act like a dog in front of other people.”

“So that’s how you felt...” Lyse murmured.

The emperor then turned to her. “It was so fun to see you battle the urge to play with me like a real dog. It was also fun to see Sidis frown when you did. I can’t believe you got jealous of a *dog*, Sidis. But, thanks to you all, I did have fun with it,” he said, nodding contentedly to himself as he thought back on it.

“Ngh...” Sidis groaned, mortified.

Paying him no mind, Emperor Egbert cut to the chase. “So, why are you a cat, Sidis?” he asked.

“The truth is...”

Sidis proceeded to explain that, after his patrol at the villa, he’d touched

some of the crystal around the Light of Origin and suddenly transformed into a cat. And since then, he'd been able to use his magic to turn back into one when he pleased.

Looking most interested, the emperor listened intently. "So you've learned how to transform, have you? Teach me, Sidis," he said at the end.

"What?! You want to turn back into a dog?"

Both Sidis and Lyse were shocked by this. They didn't know why he wanted to be a dog again.

The emperor gave them a similar look in return, seemingly surprised that they were surprised. "Sidis, surely you thought that since you couldn't see Lyse whenever you wanted to as a human, you'd be able to sneak a bit closer to her as an animal, no?"

"Hrngh..." Sidis groaned, for the emperor had hit the nail on the head.

Despite the fact that Sidis had practically outed himself, Lyse decided to play none the wiser. She thought Sidis should be one to say it himself. Still, she was surprised by the emperor's insight. Was it because he'd been transformed into an animal before himself?

"I felt the same way when I was a dog," he confessed. "As an animal, I was free of the fetters of humanity. It was wonderful."

He went on to explain that he could ask for walks whenever he wanted as a dog, and unlike in his human form, no one knew he was the emperor. That kind of disguise allowed him to avoid all manner of hassles. Lyse nodded along as he continued to make the case for canine transformation. He never had much time to himself as the emperor. Unlike the rulers of other nations, he had magic so strong that he barely needed protection, but after the most recent incident with the Donan Faith, he'd been assigned extra security detail. It was hard on him. Lyse felt bad about it, but that was simply the price they had to pay when he was being targeted.

"So ever since coming back to the empire, I've found myself wanting to turn into a dog again so I could take a leisurely walk through the garden..."

"You want to take a walk?" murmured Lyse.

“I’d even be okay on a leash,” the emperor responded with a nod. He didn’t seem to have any reservations about being treated as a pet. “I just want to go for a walk like a dog.”

“You’re really okay being leashed...?”

“I don’t want to do it as the emperor. It’d be funny. No one would ever think I was walking around as a dog,” Emperor Egbert laughed. “So, Sidis, I’ll keep quiet about you being able to turn into a cat if you teach me the transformation spell. And so this all stays just between us, I’ll have Lyse take me on my walks.”

Sidis, who had been listening silently, looked up at the emperor in exasperation before turning to Lyse as if to ask her opinion on the matter.

“I don’t really mind...” It would only look like she was walking a normal dog, after all. “But wouldn’t it be strange for a dog no one’s ever seen before to be walking around the palace?”

There would inevitably be a question of how it had gotten inside. It would be terrible if innocent guards got blamed for it.

“I also think Alcede would see through it right away,” she continued. The duke had seen the emperor as a dog before, and moreover, his behavior would be a dead giveaway.

“I’ll give up on tricking Alcede. Besides, I have another great idea,” the emperor said with a smirk.

But alas, he didn’t have time to explain—for just then, Atoli returned.

“Oh my, you aren’t friends with the cat yet?” she asked, still perfectly oblivious to the real situation.

Lyse was about to venture an explanation, but Egbert cut in with a smile. “It’s fine. Lyse just told me the trick to playing with the little fellow. We’ll be friends in no time,” he said, holding his hand out to Lyse for a toy.

Realizing what was about to happen, Sidis was taken aback. His adorable kitty face twisted in humiliation.

“Come on, kitty, play along,” the emperor said, then threatened quietly, “if you don’t want me to blab.”

Sidis thus did as he was asked. He chased after the stick the emperor waved, just like a real cat... Very desperately, at that. They continued playing for a while before Emperor Egbert took his leave, looking quite pleased with himself. On his way out, he mentioned he'd be back when he had some free time—in other words, for his first “walk.”

“Are you okay?” Lyse asked.

The mental toll the encounter must have taken on Sidis was considerable, as he'd flopped down onto the floor on the spot.

With nothing better to do than wait, Lyse and Sidis went about the next day normally. Lyse attended her lady-in-waiting in the morning. Since she'd grown closer with the other ladies, Lyse now looked forward to their chats over tea as much as she did training with them. That was a pleasant enough development...but it also meant she got put on the spot more.

For example, Lyse was having tea today with three ladies who asked how she'd met Sidis. Everyone knew she'd come to the palace as his fiancée, so they were curious about the events leading up to the engagement. All three women beheld her with sparkling eyes as they awaited the story...and Lyse didn't know what to tell them. It was a rather outrageous event. She hesitated for a moment before recounting it in a less exciting fashion.

“Um, the imperial retinue was choosing lady-in-waiting for His Majesty, and Lord Sidis selected me from the crowd...”

“What made him pick you?” they asked.

“His Majesty was ill, so they wanted someone who would respect his privacy. That's what I was told.”

Lyse couldn't tell these women that she possessed the Light of Origin, so she glossed over that part. Everyone in the palace knew that the emperor had “fallen ill” in Olwen, and as such, they readily accepted her story. Who would possibly think that “fallen ill” was code for becoming a dog, after all?

“So how did you and Lord Sidis get close?” one lady asked.

“It's rather remarkable. He's never so much as looked at another woman

before,” another added.

“My older brother likes to joke that he gained the power of the Light of Origin by swearing a sacred vow of chastity,” the third continued.

“My father said something similar about how he’d live a solitary life as a Light bearer, even into old age.”

Lyse couldn’t find it in herself to smile and laugh since that was, in truth, what Sidis and Alcede had planned for him.

“So, who made the first move? Lord Sidis?” asked one of the ladies who appeared to be close to Lyse in age physically.

Lyse faltered as she answered, “Um, it was Lord Sidis...”

Technically, all three men—including the emperor—had pressured her into the engagement, but since Lyse couldn’t admit to that, she simply said it was Sidis. Thinking back on it, however...she realized the arrangement really *was* Sidis. Lyse had acted indifferently for fear of being dragged back to the empire, but Sidis had always been nice to her because he suspected she might be Qatora.

“Lord Sidis has a surprisingly passionate side, huh?” the ladies sighed, seemingly content with Lyse’s inconsistent story.

Relieved, Lyse fled teatime to go practice magic. Her training, however, was another sore subject as she wasn’t making any progress. She still hadn’t managed to move her mana away from her body like Karl was trying to teach her.

“Maybe... Maybe I should try healing magic after all.”

Being able to learn healing would prove she could use magic. It might not be the kind of magic that would allow her to lead the charge in battle, but healing magic was considered highly valuable in the empire thanks to the constant monster fights. Lyse, however, hadn’t been able to use healing magic in her past life. People naturally had proclivities for certain magic; there were lots of people who were good at fire magic but bad with water magic, for example. And generally speaking, very few imperials were predisposed to the healing arts. When Lyse thought of it that way, healing magic seemed very much so out

of her reach.

Once she arrived at the usual practice spot, she pulled out her sword and made a very shallow cut on one of the fingers on her left hand. It hurt a bit, but she'd expected that. As it began bleeding, she sheathed her sword and tried using healing magic. After all, if she waited for Karl and Lawry to show up, there'd be another scene about who to use for practice. She didn't want anyone getting hurt for her sake, especially when she wasn't sure she'd be able to make it up to them after the fact. Answering any questions would be a pain, too. So, drawing on memories of her past life, Lyse traced the necessary symbols with her right index finger and began chanting the spell.

"Hmm..."

It appeared she'd been right to think it wouldn't work. Nothing happened when she focused her mana on her fingertip and touched the wound. She even tried casting it by pouring mana directly into the wound itself just to be sure, but still nothing happened.

"Hahh..."

Lyse had to sigh. Maybe, she thought, she should just abandon magic altogether. She'd naively been under the impression that she'd be able to learn it under Karl's wise tutelage...but if she gave up now, she'd be forced apart from Sidis.

"Still, marrying someone else..."

That was the last thing she wanted. Sidis had been so patient with her, even knowing she'd given up on the idea of marriage. If she searched long and hard, she might be able to find another imperial who understood her, but it wouldn't be the same.

"He was the only one who chose to get to know me and acknowledge me..."

If all Lyse wanted was someone to understand her, she could just as easily have chosen the emperor or Alcede. But it wasn't like that. Lyse was happy because Sidis had actually fallen in love with *her*.

"His Majesty might step in to save our marriage, yet..."

If he did, it would only put him in the hot seat. Lyse didn't want to cause him any trouble. As she was fretting over this, Karl finally arrived.

"I-I'm sorry to keep you waiting..."

He was still hesitant when he approached her, but he seemed to be getting used to Lyse. He quickly moved into talking about magic practice.

"I've considered the issue, but since there's a question of aptitude with healing magic...why don't we try restoration magic instead?" he suggested.

"Restoration magic?" Lyse questioned.

Restoration magic was a bit different from healing magic in that it mended inanimate objects, but even repairing small objects took a massive amount of mana, so not many people used it. In the past, people like antique collectors and such used it to restore irreplicable items, but after the discovery of magicless restoration techniques over a century ago, it had fallen out of use. If Lyse could learn to use it, however, it would still count as magic. It might even open the door to other types of magic.

"I'll try it," she said.

And so Karl began teaching her the symbolic formula necessary for restoration magic. To use magic, the caster needed to grasp the formula mentally and invoke it by drawing the necessary symbols in the air. As such, the first step to casting any given spell was memorizing the formula and then gathering the necessary mana to make it happen. Then, in the case of restoration magic, the caster focused that mana into the break that needed to be repaired in order to mend it.

"Lawry, the papers," Karl requested. It seemed he'd prepared all the information Lyse would need in advance. Lawry produced the bundle of papers in question, which Karl then handed over to Lyse. "First of all, you'll need to commit the formula to memory... The one on the last page is the one that will bring it all together. It would probably be best for you to trace it with your finger repeatedly...to develop muscle memory too."

"I'll give it a try."

In the frankest terms, this was not a spell meant for beginners. Someone new

to formulae would have been utterly baffled if asked to memorize something so complex. Worse yet, barely anyone used this type of magic nowadays. The formulae it required were so arcane that even Lyse, who was familiar with magic formulae from her past life, wasn't going to be able to memorize it any time soon. When she realized this, however, she simultaneously realized that it would be odd for her to so breezily agree to the task when she shouldn't know anything about it.

“Um, I think this might be a bit too much to memorize in a day. Could you give me two or three?”

When Lyse asked this in an uncertain tone, Karl also seemed to remember that she was (in theory) a complete neophyte on the subject.

“Ah, I'm sorry... By all means, take a few days. We'll just see how much you've got down tomorrow,” he offered.

Lyse was relieved to hear it. This arrangement would make it much easier to fudge her learning speed. She could just pick a random spot and claimed that she only remembered up to that but no further.

“Thank you for doing so much for me, Lord Karl. I apologize in advance if I'm unable to live up to your expectations, even with practice. If that happens, please don't take it personally. The fault isn't with you.”

In truth, there was very little chance Lyse would be able to use restoration magic. Still, she didn't want Karl to think he was a bad teacher. He'd worked so hard to come up with a way for her to learn something.

“If it turns out I can't learn magic, I'll just give up and focus on polishing my sword skills instead,” she said.

Yet though she was smiling, Karl gave her a perplexed look. “Won't that be...difficult for you?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“If you marry into the imperial family without magic, the nobles are likely to snub you. It happened to me behind closed doors. Even though I'm the son of the emperor's sister, I can't use it well enough to fight. Even if no one says it to your face, behind your back...”

Karl paused there. It seemed he'd been the subject of much gossip and being ridiculed all his life had profoundly affected him.

"Moreover, you have the potential to use magic. Are you really willing to give up on it?" he asked, giving Lyse a serious look.

She wasn't sure how to answer him. After all, she'd lived her entire life this time around without any hope of using it. As such, if people insulted her for not having it, all she could think was *"I can't do what I can't do."* In fact, if there were any nobles who criticized her, a foreign lady, for not being able to use magic, she'd need to be wary of them for a different reason. They were the kind of people who were likely to abandon their own children in another country for having weak mana.

Emicia, the Olwenian lady-in-waiting who had been responsible for all the fuss back in the royal capital, was one such victim. Her mother had been cast aside by her imperial father, leaving her and her daughter Emicia to a hard life. They grew to resent the Razanate Empire for it. And for the future's sake, Lyse didn't want anyone else to end up like that.

That's right... If I can't use magic, I could gather people like that and work on a way for them to live in the empire or something.

While Lyse's thoughts began to wander in a different direction, Karl continued, looking worried, "If it's hard for you...then being with me instead would..."

He was probably going to offer to marry her to make her life easier. He couldn't bear to see her suffer, so he was offering to save her out of the kindness of his heart. But Lyse couldn't agree to that. She wasn't so pessimistic about her future that was willing to entrust it to Karl's pity. There was one man in this country who understood her, and that alone was enough to make Lyse feel blessed.

"I appreciate your feelings, Lord Karl," she said, gently rejecting him.

At this, he cast his eyes downward as though he were ashamed. Lyse wondered if she'd gone too far, but Karl's next words surprised her...

"Do you hate me?"

“Huh...?”

When Karl raised his head, he had a feverish look in his eyes.

“I might look younger than you, but I’m much older.”

I-I know that. She could only answer him internally—her shocked mouth wouldn’t move.

“In truth, you and I are much closer in age than you are with Prince Sidis.”

I know that too...

“We might even be a better match. Knowing that...would you reconsider?”

What should I do? Lyse was flummoxed. *It would wound him if I said no outright.* She was worried he might withdraw from their magic lessons together if she rebuffed him. And all else aside, she was reluctant to hurt him after what he’d done for her.

Puzzling over the ordeal, Lyse suddenly remembered a story one of the ladies-in-waiting had complained of back in Olwen. Someone’s dance instructor had confessed to them, but she’d had to turn him down since she was already engaged... Still, that didn’t exactly give Lyse an out since her situation was somewhat different.

Wait, this really could only be an offer of pity. He probably doesn’t want his pupil going into an unhappy marriage. But I have to be careful how I say this, because I don’t want to sound like I’m ungrateful for his kindness...

“I suppose...you would...” Karl relented, seeming to take her silence for an answer.

Lyse was relieved. “I am engaged already after all, Lord Karl. But I respect you as a te—”

Just as she was about to finish her sentence, someone interrupted her: “Why not do away with your engagement, then?”

“What?”

Lawry, who should have been waiting some distance away, had appeared next to the couple with unasked-for advice. “Lord Karl can void engagement

magic, and you seem to be hung up on your current engagement, Miss Lyse. That being the case,” he said, smiling, “why not break it off and give Lord Karl here a chance?”

“That’s true... I *could* break off the engagement...” Karl whispered. Thanks to Lawry’s interloping ways, he was now staring at Lyse with a strange look in his eyes.

This was bad.

“L-Lord Karl, please, get a hold of yourself,” she begged.

Lyse just wanted him to go back to being bashful around women. *Otherwise, he really might void my engagement!* If that happened, things could go south quickly.

Nevertheless, Lyse couldn’t think of a good way out of this. She discreetly squared up. If it came to that, she’d take Karl down and make a break for it. If she attacked him suddenly, she’d be able to catch him off guard. That was all the opportunity she needed, even if it meant taking out Lawry next.

Lyse thus steeled herself as she watched Karl’s hand reach out for her, but his next words caught *her* off guard— “Perhaps it’s the engagement magic that’s preventing you from using magic.”

“What...?”

Karl grabbed her in her bewilderment, smoothly tracing the symbols of a formula on the back of her hand. It took him less than three seconds to finish etching the names of the stars in the sky together. A sparkling ball of light then floated up.

“No!” Lyse tried to grab it, but it popped like a bubble and disappeared before she could touch it. “What have you done...?”

Though she asked, Lyse knew exactly what had just happened. Karl had voided her engagement contract without her consent. Behind Karl, who was smiling darkly, Lawry was also grinning like he was enjoying himself.

As he continued to stare at Lyse’s hand, Karl muttered, “This is all so you can use magic. You can always redo the engagement ritual. Now, we should try to

see if you can cast— Ow!”

There, something white leaped between Lyse and Karl and began scratching at the latter’s arm. Karl pulled back in pain, while Lawry’s eyes went wide. The white thing that had attacked—Sidis—then landed beside them, his fur bristling in a way that suggested he was ready for a fight. But what if the men attacked him in retaliatory anger? Lyse was worried for his safety, but it seemed the pain he’d inflicted was enough to snap Karl back to his senses.

He gasped, then whispered, “What did I...? I didn’t mean to, Miss Lyse... I’m sorry...” He staggered a couple of steps back, as if pulling himself away, then turned to Lawry. “Get back.”

“...Understood.”

The attendant, who had been ready to grab Sidis in his cat form, reluctantly retreated all the way to the edge of the garden. It would probably take him about ten seconds to run back over to where they were. He shouldn’t be able to hear them from this distance so long as they didn’t raise their voices, either.

Lyse took a breath. Things would have been dangerous if they’d attacked Sidis. Lyse could have easily kept one of the two occupied herself, but that would have left the other to go after the cat. She was sure he could hold his own, but she didn’t want to see things get that ugly.

He might have even said something if he’d gotten heated enough, which would only mean more trouble...

It’d be fine if the men just thought they were confused, but it would be bad if one of them recognized the prince’s voice. Despite how shaken she was over what Karl had just done, Lyse knew she needed to prioritize keeping Sidis’s identity a secret. As for Sidis, he seemed on edge, but he was rubbing up against Lyse’s leg like a cat would. He was getting much better at playing the part.

Karl, meanwhile, seemed to have calmed down completely. He sighed as he apologized again, “I’m deeply sorry, Miss Lyse. I don’t know what came over me. Please, go find Lord Sidis and redo the ritual...”

Hearing him say that was enough for Lyse to forgive him. What was done was

done, after all, and all they could do to move forward would fix it. She didn't want to be too hard on him if he was sincerely penitent.

“Thank you... I accept your apology.”

When he heard those words, Karl heaved a sigh of relief before honestly confessing his honest feelings: “I truly am sorry. Something just...came over me. Really...I'm jealous of the special power you possess. That's why I wanted to try whatever we could, for whatever chance I had. And then I remembered that sometimes other magic gets in the way of casting things...”

Lyse was sympathetic. Sometimes envy drove people to do strange things. She understood that, as a magical researcher, he wanted to try every experiment at his disposal. He'd devoted himself to the pursuit because of his own lack of mana, and it was clear he enjoyed it. But in truth...all he wanted was to be able to use magic like anyone else. Lyse, too, had once longed to be “normal.”

I used to wonder why I couldn't be demure like other girls...

Other noble girls had always enjoyed playing with dolls and other ladylike hobbies, and it had caused Lyse a great deal of consternation that she didn't fit the mold. She forced herself to stay inside like a good girl, unable to defend herself, and it was all she could do to cry. Those days were unspeakably difficult and painful for Lyse. Even so, she'd always tried her best to put on a good face and fit in. Her aunt had never let her live her ways down, however. In Olwen, she was just a failure of a lady who'd never live a “normal” life.

But now that she was in the empire, she didn't need to put on the proper lady act anymore. She was glad, oh-so glad, to say goodbye to the country that had demanded she be someone else. But Karl was different—he still longed to be “normal” here in the empire. That was why he'd been so frustrated by Lyse's inability to use magic despite her tremendous power, and it had spurred him to act rashly. Even though Lyse understood that... She couldn't quite resolve her feelings on the matter, but she *wanted* to forgive him.

“Still, the Light of Origin is utterly beyond our control. If I were able to unravel its true nature, I might be able to create a formula that would allow you to use magic, but...” Karl continued.

Even Lyse thought that he might be able to find a way for her to use magic if he deciphered the Light's power, but that was impossible. He couldn't get anywhere near it. Lyse also couldn't imagine such a discovery would thrill future emperors. The pillar of the Light of Origin was the result of magic gone wrong that somehow anchored itself in that form. It was presumably an accident, and the idea of someone coming to understand its inner workings could shake up how power was passed down in the empire.

"I can't approach the Light. If I forced myself to enter the villa, I'd be sick within the day. That's why I'd given up on myself, but..." Karl looked up at Lyse apologetically. "If you married me, our children might inherit the Light, which should allow them to get close to it. I just thought it would be nice if...someone carried on my dream."

There, Karl inhaled and exhaled deeply like he was moving on.

"I'm sorry for making you listen to my sad story. I understand if you cannot accept any further lessons from me... But I'd just be happy if you tried what I suggested today. It would be nice...if it worked. And," he continued, "if you'll still let me search for a way for you to use magic with you, I'll keep researching. There has to be something. It would be a waste of your power if there wasn't."

With that, Karl forced a smile and took his leave with Lawry in tow.

Once they were out of sight, Sidis looked up at Lyse worriedly. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Forcing a smile of her own, Lyse picked him up. "I'm sorry... He broke our engagement magic."

Before anything else, she'd wanted to apologize for that. But once the words left her...she felt empty, like she'd been robbed of her bond with Sidis.

"I'm so sorry..." she whispered, her voice trembling.

"Lyse..." Sidis called, then stretched up to put his paws on her shoulders as he licked her cheek.

Seeing Sidis trying to comfort her, Lyse felt like she might actually cry. Their engagement was important to him too. He might have even held it more dearly than she did, yet he forgave her so he could comfort her. It hurt her heart to

know that, and if she broke down in tears here, she'd be squandering his sweet comfort. She wanted him to know it was working, so she bade herself smile again.

"That tickles, Lord Sidis."

"All that matters is that you're smiling. We can do the ceremony over again anytime we want," he said happily, licking her even more.

"Oh, stop that."

"I'm a cat right now. This is the only feline way I can think of to express my affection," Sidis declared, rubbing his head against her neck.

When she reflexively laughed, she felt a bit better. "Thank you again, Lord Sidis. Because of you, I didn't have to throw Lord Karl... I'm sure that would have caused problems."

Being scratched by a cat most likely meant you deserved it, but being thrown by a lady-in-waiting was a whole different story. Lyse was quite sincere in her concern, but for some reason, Sidis started laughing.

"Did I say something funny?" she asked.

"No, I was just thinking how like you that is," he told her after getting over his little laughing fit. "Now, His Majesty is calling for us. It's probably about...that."

"Ah..." Recalling her outstanding business with the emperor put a sly smile on Lyse's face.

"We can do something about the engagement magic later. Let's get this over with first," Sidis urged.

And so the happy couple set off for the emperor's quarters.

Chapter 4: The Lady-in-Waiting, Empowered

The emperor was waiting when Sidis and Lyse arrived.

“You’re late!” he barked.

“Please excuse our tardiness,” Lyse apologized, quickly bowing to hide the surprise writ on her face...

For Emperor Egbert had already transformed into a white dog. What’s more, Alcede was holding a leash attached to his red leather collar. His Majesty looked positively like a house pet. His canine appearance was just as it had been in Olwen, but hearing human language come out of his adorable doggy mouth was most uncanny. Before, he’d only been able to howl and whine.

“Being able to talk like this is fantastic. Back in Olwen, I blabbed whatever complaints came to mind because no one could understand me, but that actually took the fun out of it,” Egbert said, sitting down and scratching his head with one of his hind legs. It seemed he’d fully inhabited his canine form quite quickly, perhaps because he’d already had a chance to get comfortable with it in Olwen.

“So, Your Majesty, where would you like to go on your walk? You said that you’d come up with the perfect reason for an unfamiliar dog to be out and about inside the palace, but you’ve yet to share it with us,” Sidis ventured, crossing his arms and looking down at the emperor. He’d been wary about the comments he might get if he came in cat form, so he’d changed back to a human and put on clothes first.

Egbert stood up on all fours before declaring proudly, “A simple affair. You can just say that you brought me along because you discovered I have a resistance to the Light of Origin. That will allow us to freely go back and forth from the villa, don’t you think?”

“You want me to say *what?!* ” cried Sidis at the crazy idea. Saying a dog was resistant to the Light was outrageous, and he didn’t want to have to be the one

to say it.

“We could even spin the same tale about you as a cat. Great idea, right?” the emperor continued, giving his cousin a great big canine smile. Were it not for his voice, he would have been utterly indistinguishable from a large happy dog.

“Don’t worry,” cut in Alcede, who was grinning like he was having a ball. “We’ve already shared the story. You won’t need to do a thing.”

“So you’ve already told everyone...?” muttered Sidis, dumbfounded.

“Please, you don’t have to thank me,” said Alcede, still smiling.

“And just how did you tell them we’d found this dog, Alcede?!” Sidis demanded.

“Oh, I just fibbed a little and said we picked it up outside of the capital on our way back from Olwen. I told everyone that His Majesty had come to realize his love of dogs.”

Sidis frowned. “It’s far too convenient for a dog we *just happened* to find to also *just happen* to have a resistance to the Light.”

“Just as convenient as it was for us to find you a wife who also possesses the Light, wouldn’t you say? Besides, merely having a resistance isn’t *that* absurd, is it? Frankly, I think finding a dog with resistance to the Light near the capital is far more believable than finding a woman in another country with the Light itself inside her,” Alcede explained, shutting Sidis down.

Not even Lyse could object to that. It was perfectly plausible that people and animals who lived in proximity to the imperial capital might develop some natural resistance to the Light.

So, finally, Sidis seemed to relent. “Fine. Let us go,” he said.

“Take me to the villa, Sidis!” the emperor ordered, leaping forward—or at least, trying to. The leash Alcede was holding was a bit too short for that.

Watching the emperor flail his forelegs midair made Lyse grimace. He was behaving exactly as a dog would. *But I suppose he should be acting like a dog since he’s pretending to be one...* She had mixed feelings on the matter.

Once the emperor settled down a bit, Alcede handed the leash to Sidis. The

prince then turned to the emperor and asked, “Do you really think it best to bring Miss Lyse with us? She still hasn’t mastered any magic...”

“Don’t you think taking her to the villa will prove she’s quite suitable to marry into the imperial family? You can manage that much...can’t you, Miss Lyse?” Egbert asked in turn, sounding unusually worried at the end.

“Um...”

Though Lyse had the Light of Origin within her, no one yet knew if she would prove capable of using magic. Alcede, however, had a very practical solution for the matter.

“I’ll simply bring her back if she begins to feel ill. If she’s all right approaching the Light, then this will be a good opportunity to see exactly how close she can get,” he suggested, highlighting the fact that they’d have to test it eventually anyway.

Everyone nodded in agreement. If Lyse could handle herself near the Light, that should go a long way to proving her worth as Sidis’s wife-to-be. As such, Lyse absolutely wanted to give it a try. Sidis, on the other hand, was concerned.

“I don’t mind, but...” He gave Lyse a grave look and asked, “Are you truly comfortable with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s where you died...”

Lyse couldn’t help smiling when she realized he was worried about her visiting the place of her final moments. Sweet little Sidis hadn’t changed much.

“Don’t worry,” she insisted. “I proudly think of it as the place I fulfilled my ultimate duty as a knight. Besides, I told you it wasn’t a painful experience.”

If she’d been unable to save Sidis at the time, it would’ve been a painful memory indeed. One too horrific to even think of revisiting. But thankfully, Lyse had no such reservations about returning to the villa.

“If you’re sure...” Sidis still looked worried, but he deferred to Lyse’s judgment.

With that, the trio and their canine emperor left the room. The guards outside

were startled to see them walking a dog, but no one said anything since the party in question acted like this was all perfectly normal.

They're probably wondering where in the world the dog came from... Lyse thought with a strained smile.

All of the knights and officials they passed did double takes. The emperor happily returned their blank stares with an open-mouthed puppy smile and a wag of his tail.

"You're having way too much fun..." Sidis whispered once no one else was around.

"This is the only time I get to see people make such stupid faces. You could learn a thing or two from me, you know. You're too reserved in cat form," Egbert whispered in return.

"I-I think I play the part quite well, thank you." Sidis seemed a bit irritated by the criticism of his performance.

"Pfft! All you do is walk around on four legs. You've never tried sitting like a catloaf, or twisting and wiggling like a normal cat would."

"Tch..." Unable to argue, Sidis gritted his teeth in annoyance.

"Um," Lyse piped up. "I think you were a most convincing cat, Lord Sidis. I didn't realize it was you until you revealed yourself."

"Thank you," he replied, a great smile blooming on his face.

"What about me, Lyse?" the emperor asked, equally eager for a compliment.

"You're absolutely adorable, Your Majesty."

"Aren't I, though?"

His tail was now swishing back and forth fiercely. He was the spitting image of a happy dog on a walk. Lyse smiled in wry amusement. *Why are they arguing over who's more like an animal anyway?* She didn't understand, but seeing them bicker like this brought back memories from their childhoods a hundred years prior.

Before long, the group arrived at the villa. Lyse didn't yet feel anything from

the Light. There was no pressure, probably thanks to the Light of Origin within her.

“Are you all right?” Sidis asked.

“Yes,” she replied with a smile.

It seemed all was well, but the knights guarding the front gate to the villa were shocked to see a dog. So shocked, in fact, that they didn’t pay any mind to Lyse, who wasn’t part of the imperial family. She figured their awe was only natural, as no animal had ever entered the villa grounds since it was built.

“Prince Sidis, um, that dog...” one of the guards stammered.

“It seems to have some resistance to the Light of Origin, so I’ve brought it here to the villa to investigate that.”

“A *dog* with resistance to the Light?!” Both guards’ eyes went wide.

“We don’t know how it came to be,” Sidis replied, his tone heavy.

The knights didn’t ask any more questions after that. Flabbergasted, they just quietly stared as they let the dog through with the others.

“Honestly,” Sidis muttered. “Don’t you think that was a bit ridiculous?”

“What’s done is done. Now let’s get a move on. How are you feeling, Lyse?” Egbert asked stealthily, trotting forward with a light gait.

“I don’t feel anything at all.” Even after entering the grounds, she felt no pressure.

The group continued to advance through the building. Once they reached the courtyard, there it was...a pillar of light reaching toward the heavens.

“Wow...”

Seeing the Light sparkle with golden particles, Lyse had to stop and wonder if it had looked like this a century ago too. She’d never gotten so close to the pillar in her previous life, save for her final moments—and at the time, she was so preoccupied with saving Sidis that she hadn’t gotten a good look at it. But now that she beheld it, she thought it was beautiful. The area around it was nice and warm, and she felt no fear whatsoever. She just remembered how hard she’d

worked a century ago.

“Lyse...” Sidis looked at her anxiously, still seeming worried.

Lyse smiled at him again. “I was just thinking, ‘Is this what the Light of Origin looked like back then?’” she replied honestly.

Hearing this, Alcede burst out laughing. “How lighthearted! Don’t you have memories of dying here?”

“I do, but I was so desperate to save Lord Sidis that it was the last thing on my mind. I didn’t realize it was this beautiful.”

“I’m glad...” A wave of relief washed over Sidis’s face when he realized Lyse was truly unbothered.

The emperor let out a snort before rubbing against her legs. “If you’re fine getting this close to the Light of Origin, it must truly be something similar to mana.”

“The Light is magical in nature, after all,” Sidis remarked, gazing up at the pillar. “I wonder if we should just think of the Light as incredibly dense mana.”

“If that’s the case...then why is Miss Lyse having trouble using it as such?” Alcede asked.

It was a good question, and Lyse shared his puzzlement. “I’ve been practicing what Lord Karl taught me, but as things stand, I lose the ability to use my mana as soon as I move it away from my body,” she explained. She then demonstrated what she’d learned.

“So it *can* be used as mana, huh?” Alcede murmured, looking fixedly at her glowing index finger.

“But you still can’t use magic, can you?” the emperor asked.

“No...” Lyse shook her head, then recalled the idea that had been suggested to her. “Lord Karl said I should try restoration magic. I’m still memorizing the formulae.”

“So there’s a chance you’ll be able to use magic by touching something?”

“Given how things have gone so far, I don’t have very high hopes...but I’m

going to try everything I can since Lord Karl is trying so hard to help me find a way.”

“Karl, huh...” Sidis muttered. It didn’t show on his face, but his tone indicated he had mixed feelings.

Hearing this, Alcede smirked. “My, are you jealous, Sidis? You are, aren’t you?”

“Shut up.”

“Let me guess... You were overjoyed that your love was mutual and you were going to get married! But then someone discovered a way to break off engagement magic, which casts some doubt on the future of your happy marriage. And worse yet, you’re beside yourself because the very man who can nullify your engagement is the one teaching your fiancée magic.”

Sidis silently gave Alcede a bitter look.

“Knock it off, Alcede,” chided the emperor.

“If only I could use magic myself...” sighed Lyse.

Now that he’d angered the emperor and upset Lyse, even Alcede knew it was best to shut his mouth.

“Don’t worry. We were the ones who presumed the engagement ritual would ensure things. It was just...unlucky...that someone happened to come up with a way to void it while we were abroad,” Sidis offered. He was trying to make her feel better, but it had the opposite effect.

“Whatever the case, there must be a reason the Light is difficult to use for magic. We’ll need to come up with another plan while we have the chance,” Egbert said, sitting himself down to think.

“By the way, Miss Lyse...” Alcede piped up again. “Are you quite all right? I’m curious if you feel anything this close to the Light of Origin.”

“Not really. I don’t feel any of the pressure I did in my past life, probably thanks to the Light within me.”

Even so, it wouldn’t be good for her to get *too* close. Something may yet happen. When she took a wary step back, she noticed the white crystals at her

feet and recalled how Sidis had said he discovered his transformation technique after touching one.

Maybe I could learn something for myself...

Hopeful, she crouched down to reach out for the stones...yet nothing happened. Feeling a bit discouraged, she then departed the villa with the rest of the group.

Once they were nearly back to the palace, the bell tower began ringing. Everyone looked upward, knowing that the alarm bells in town would've sounded if the attack were terrestrial.

"This again?"

"They must be airborne, but where are they?"

While Sidis and Alcede scoured the sky, the emperor started trying to howl.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?" Lyse asked. She was worried that he'd suddenly lost the ability to speak again, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

"No," he replied casually enough. "If we're going to the scene, I figured I won't be able to use human speech. I was just practicing."

Lyse wasn't sure what to say. His lack of urgency given the situation was somewhat unnerving.

"There, Alcede!" Sidis cried when he spotted the monsters. He then quickly handed Lyse the emperor's leash. "Please take His Majesty," he said before taking off.

"I want to know what's happening too! Let's go!" the emperor cried, chasing after him and dragging Lyse along for the ride.

The group soon arrived at the eastern wing of the palace. Monsters were already descending from the sky.

"We've shored up our aerial defenses, but..." the emperor grumbled.

"There are too many of them," Alcede interjected.

And he was quite right—there were easily twice as many monsters as there had been the day Lyse first arrived at the palace. The knights mounted their

raptors with all haste this time, but they were outnumbered. The monsters slipped right through their ranks. Round, black balls of fur fell from the sky, turning into long, thin rats and skinny rabbit monsters. The knights on the ground moved in to exterminate them.

“Rgh... If only I were in human form...” The emperor was annoyed that he couldn’t join the fight, but it would cause a scene if he transformed now.

“Miss Lyse, take His Majesty inside,” Alcede ordered.

Both she and Egbert obliged, making a beeline for the palace. They passed several brave ladies-in-waiting and knights on their way out.

“Hey, Lyse. I at least want to see what’s happening,” he whispered once they were inside.

“Understood.”

Lyse thus began searching for a good vantage point. She found what appeared to be a receiving room, as it was sparse of furniture other than a table and chairs. The veranda window made for an excellent view. Egbert stood on his hind legs, intently watching out of it.

“Why are there so many...?” With her memories from her past life, Lyse knew that this was an inordinate amount of monsters to appear. “I know it’s not like they come in groups of specific numbers but...”

“You’re right. Something’s wrong,” the emperor agreed. “It’s strange enough that they keep surprising us from the air.”

As Lyse and the emperor chatted, they watched the knights whittle away at the mass of monsters. In an unfortunate turn of events, however, a birdlike creature with four wings fell to the ground nearby...and one of the monsters that rolled off its back crashed through the window to the receiving room.

“Hmph! Allow me to—”

“No, Your Majesty!”

As Egbert prepared to cast a spell, Lyse pulled hard on his leash. He stumbled a few steps back toward her and demanded, “Why not?! It would be easy for me to defeat it with magic!”

“There are ladies-in-waiting nearby!”

Worse, they’d seen the monster crash into the palace and were headed this way. If they saw the emperor use magic in this condition, they might mistake him for a monster too. Even if they benignly thought him to be a rare dog that could use magic, he was liable to be captured and studied for research.

“Your Majesty, if you use magic now, you won’t be able to just feign ignorance by transforming back! Let’s get out of here!” she pleaded. Escape seemed to be their only option at the moment.

“Fine,” the emperor conceded with a nod. He then dashed for the door, pulling Lyse along behind him.

“Your Majesty!”

The monster that had rolled into the room was charging at the emperor, perhaps thinking he would be a tasty snack. Lyse quickly released the leash so that he could get away faster. Thanks to that, the rabbit monster’s front claws only gouged into the door instead. Nevertheless, it continued its pursuit. Lyse didn’t have time to wait for the court ladies to arrive. She didn’t even have time to draw her own sword, so she made a split-second decision.

“Hyaaaah!”

Taking advantage of the fact that the monster was distracted with the emperor, she moved in to punch it with her bare hands. If she could get its attention, that should at least buy them some time. Lyse braced for a fight, but...

The monster, which was nearly as large as Lyse herself, went rolling toward the hearth after being slugged. Its soft, fluffy fur belied its viciousness. Lyse knew one punch wouldn’t be enough to stop it, so she drew her sword and readied herself.

“Huh...?”

But when the monster rose to its feet again, it began wiggling and let out a loud squeak before obsequiously flopping down in front of her.

“What in the world?” Lyse wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but let’s get back outside,” the emperor suggested. “We’ll be safer among the others.”

They couldn’t risk letting another monster come inside after them, so Lyse and the emperor headed back outside. As they ran, another avian monster swooped down at them.

“Awooooo!” the emperor howled like a dog.

The birdlike monster swiped at the canine emperor with its wings, but he dodged and retaliated with a bite. It didn’t seem to faze the monster much, however. It simply raised its wings again and shook him off.

“Bowowooow!”

“Your—”

With people around, Lyse realized she couldn’t address the emperor as the emperor. So, choking back her cry, she tossed her sword aside and ran to his aid. Another lady-in-waiting thankfully made it to him first, but Lyse’s relief was short-lived...for the monster now charged at her instead, and she was unarmed.

“Hmph!”

Lyse fearlessly threw herself to the ground to dodge the monster, which was easily twice the size of a horse. In the process, her hand grazed the beast’s stomach, and...

“Skreeeeech!” the bird monster wailed before inexplicably dropping to the ground.

“Huh...?”

It was just like before. Lyse didn’t know what had happened. Just touching a monster wasn’t enough to make it fall out of the sky. Moreover, it didn’t attack when approached. It just looked at her pleadingly. It finally began squirming...and sat down like a little chick, chirping and tilting its head.

“This is incredibly suspicious...but it’s not attacking.”

This was the first Lyse had ever encountered a monster that did anything other than try to kill her. As she stood there simply staring at it, unsure what to do, the emperor (who’d escaped from the lady-in-waiting that saved him

earlier) approached.

“What’s this? Again?” he asked discreetly.

“I don’t know what to make of it myself,” Lyse responded. She was at a loss.

Two court ladies then ran up, but they too stood there staring at the cowed monster.

“Lyse!” Once he’d handled his part of the battle, Sidis came running as well. He wasn’t sure what to make of the strangely behaving monster either. “What’s going on with this one?”

“It’s hard to explain, but...it ended up like this after I touched it. This is the second one too,” Lyse confessed.

“There’s another?”

She proceeded to tell him what had happened in the receiving room. When Sidis went inside to see it for himself, a grim look crossed his face.

“It’s still here, just calmly waiting,” he observed.

“What on earth?” Lyse wondered aloud, slowly approaching the monster a step at a time. Its ears twitched and it began squeaking again.

Oh my goodness... How endearing.

She just wanted to pet the cute animal. So moved, she dared to get closer with Sidis at her side.

“Be careful. It might just be feigning this behavior,” he warned when they got within arm’s reach.

Lyse, however, decided to abandon the slow and steady approach. She now boldly reached out to touch the beast. It was just as fluffy as when she’d punched it earlier. The rabbit monster’s eyes softened, and it happily flopped down on the floor. Sidis was shocked to see it roll over and expose its underbelly.

“Wow, it’s sure acting like a pet, isn’t it?” remarked Lyse.

“Is it just for you, or...” Sidis muttered as he reached out for the beast himself. It hadn’t shown any fear when Lyse touched it. Its eyes shot to Lyse to make

sure she was still there, but it didn't otherwise move when Sidis touched it either. "Has it accepted you as its master?"

"It seems that way... Should I tell it to move? Ask it to sit?"

Sidis nodded, and Lyse tried giving a command. The rabbit monster slowly stood before flopping its bottom down on the floor to sit upright like a person.



“That settles it, then...”

Though they had no explanation for it, it seemed that Lyse had tamed the monster.

“What should we do with it? If it’s not going to attack, I think maybe we should take it closer to the Light of Origin, but...”

Monsters often attacked and ate humans and animals near the Light. They were exterminated as soon as they were discovered. But if this one behaved, there shouldn’t be any need to kill it.

“We’ll just have to test it and see,” said Egbert, still in dog form. He’d come in at some point and taken a seat beside Lyse. “But its size is a problem... If we wait until tonight to take it, we’ll have to find some tight-lipped knights to guard it until then. We’ll also need to see if it’s still tame once Lyse leaves.”

“That’s true. If it were smaller, I could watch over it in my room—” Lyse was suddenly struck with an idea. The monster had grown to this size from a ball of fur, hadn’t it? “Can you turn tiny?”

On command, the monster squeaked and shrunk down small enough to fit in the palm of Lyse’s hand. She stood there frozen for a few seconds, stunned to actually get this kind of result. The monster hopped over to her feet, pawing at the hem of her skirt.

How adorable!

“Now we can transport it unnoticed!” Lyse cheered. When she turned back around, she saw Sidis (still shocked) nodding slowly and the emperor sitting with his jaw hanging open.

“Let’s get the bird that’s outside too. Once we make it small, we can head back to the villa,” the former suggested.

Lyse quickly got to work. She quietly called the bird monster inside, then asked it to shrink down too. She put both miniature monsters in a basket that was in the corner of the room and covered them with a handkerchief. While she was doing that, Sidis used oath magic to make the nearby ladies-in-waiting swear they wouldn’t tell anyone what they’d seen.

“Why do they need to keep it secret?” Lyse inquired.

“If this goes well, our problems will be solved even if you can’t properly use magic. We should just keep it under wraps until we verify the truth... I suspect this is probably because of the Light,” Sidis explained.

“Because of the Light?” she asked.

“It couldn’t be anything else,” the emperor affirmed, seeming to understand the situation. “If there’s something magical you can do that no one else can, the difference must be having the Light of Origin inside you. I’d like to see if Sidis can do it as well.”

“I’ve never even thought about touching a monster before,” he said thoughtfully.

No one could blame him. No one in their right mind would ever try to touch a monster barehanded—especially not when swords and magic were an option. Lyse had only done it out of desperation in the heat of the moment.

“We’ll have a chance to experiment with me another day. For now, we should return to the villa,” Sidis urged.

And so the trio headed back the way they’d come. As they were walking...

“Hey!”

“Huh?”

“What’s going on?!”

The ground wasn’t quaking, but all three of them were suddenly hit with a shaking sensation. Turning around, they could see the knights in the distance who were dealing with the aftermath of the monster attack had fallen to their knees.

“The pillar...” The first one to notice was Sidis. He was looking up at the Light of Origin.

The instant Lyse turned to see for herself, she was hit with another tremor-like feeling. The pillar itself was shaking. She gasped.

The emperor immediately barked, “Hurry!”

As if spurred by his voice, they all began running. They were only a short distance from the villa now, and when they arrived, they found the guards on duty collapsed.

“Hark! Are you okay?!” Sidis called out.

One of the knights opened his eyes and answered, “Lord Sidis... An intruder...”

“There’s an intruder?!”

As soon as they heard this, the group dashed inside. All was silent. They couldn’t hear a single sound. So without any other recourse, they headed straight for the Light of Origin. Whatever was causing it to shake had to be near the pillar itself. The intruders were likely nearby as well.

The trio moved slowly and carefully, on guard for attacks as they proceeded. It thus took them a little longer to reach the Light, but when it was finally in view...they immediately spotted someone who shouldn’t have been there.

“Lord Karl?!” Lyse exclaimed.

A boy in a black robe had fallen on his side next to the pillar. His golden hair covered half his face, but she recognized him instantly. Before rushing to his side, both she and Sidis stopped to survey their surroundings. They didn’t want to get ambushed because they rushed in recklessly.

All still seemed silent. Lyse couldn’t sense anyone else’s presence, but her instincts told her danger was near. Sidis must have felt the same thing, because he held his ground as his eyes vigilantly scanned the area around them. The seconds ticked by... If they didn’t do anything, they’d be here forever. But if they made a move, wouldn’t the enemy do the same?

Lyse decided to go for it, but the emperor sprang into action first. The second she turned to see what he was doing, a magical blue light came flying at her.

“Lyse!” Sidis cried. Before it hit her, he jumped in the way and put up a mana wall to reflect it.

That was the opening the enemy had been waiting for. A man leaped out toward the emperor. He must have assumed taking the dog hostage would be a

good way to gain the upper hand...but unfortunately for him, this was no normal dog.

“Hmph!” The emperor conjured a blade of air to slash at his attacker.

It didn’t wound the man much, but it stymied his assault. Sidis followed with a spell of his own to knock the man to the ground and restrain him. As if he’d been waiting for that, a second man jumped out.

“Huh?!”

The entire group was taken by surprise, but an unexpected member of their party was quick to respond. With a peep, the bird in Lyse’s basket flew out—returning to its normal size in an instant—and rushed at the man, knocking him to the ground.

“Don’t kill him!” Lyse cried out to stop it, but the coast was clear. It seemed the man had fainted, for he didn’t move a muscle after hitting the floor. “They really do listen to me...”

Lyse took a deep breath in relief. Since the bird was a monster, she was worried its friendly behavior was some kind of fluke. But though it attacked someone just now, it had readily pulled back when she gave the word. She truly seemed to be the monsters’ master now.

As she was contemplating that, the bird started rooting around the man’s wrist with its beak. It wasn’t trying to eat him, however.

“Huh? Are you looking for something?” Lyse asked, but when she got closer, she saw it for herself. “This man’s a Donan follower...” she gasped.

For indeed, he was wearing a bracelet of black stone. Sidis used his own coat to tie up the second man, then had the emperor sit on his back while he checked his arms. A frown crossed his lips.

“So that’s how they got so far into the villa...” he sighed.

“What should we do? Take them off? Ah, wait! No! Stop that!”

The bird monster seemed deeply interested in the bracelet, because it kept pecking at the man’s wrist. It would break skin at this rate. When Lyse tried to interfere, she accidentally touched the stones herself. With a tiny clinking

sound, the bracelet broke, and the monster immediately gobbled it down.

“W-Wait!”

She didn’t even have a chance to stop it. Narrowing its eyes in satisfaction, the monster disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

“Nothing we can do about it now...”

“You’re right.”

Now wasn’t the time to worry about it. Lyse looked around again, though it appeared there were no other enemies in hiding.

“Hey, does this guy have a black stone on him too?” the emperor asked, stepping on the second attacker again.

“Probably. Based on his clothing, he appears to be a knight...but I don’t recognize him. If he doesn’t work in the palace, he likely wouldn’t be able to set foot inside the villa without one,” Sidis said, swiftly tying up the man whose bracelet was eaten before attempting to wake the second attacker.

“Huh...? Prince Sidis...?” he groaned, seeming genuinely surprised to see Sidis upon waking.

“So you know me?” he asked. “Where’s your post, knight?”

“Um, I guard the western side of the capital. Er, where am I, Your Highness...?”

“This again...” the emperor muttered some distance away from the man.

“Yes, it’s just like back in Olwen.”

The group knew the Donan Faith had to be behind this, but the emperor had already issued a decree to get rid of any of their black stones. There was no way the cultist had put up stone pillars here to manipulate the masses—they’d stand out too much in the capital. Conversely, however, that would make it harder to track down who exactly was responsible.

“These men weren’t just controlled by someone who can come and go from the palace... It must have been someone who can enter the villa as well. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to slip past the guards,” the emperor

said with a sigh. “I suppose this confirms things. The person who killed you in your past life was also secreted in by some noble.”

“Wait...” Lyse gasped.

The emperor was talking about the intruder with the black sword. They’d speculated that it was made from the same black stone the Donan Faith favored, but there was no way to confirm it. It had been a hundred years since, and nothing of the sort had ever happened again. The emperor at the time and his court hadn’t been able to track down whoever was responsible, and it would only be harder to track them down now. Lyse had wanted to find the culprit who’d made Sidis suffer so, but...

“You think it’s the same person?” she asked. If the mastermind behind that incident was also behind this one, then...

“If so, it should be easier to uncover evidence. They leave a little more of it with every crime they commit. Still, there’s a chance I could be wrong. There could be someone new among the nobility who has ties to the Donan Faith...”

If this incident was unrelated to the events of a century ago, that would indicate there were a growing number of nobles involved with the cult—an ill omen for the empire. As the trio all silently wished for it to be the same culprit, they all glanced at the still-unconscious man on the ground...who began convulsing. He didn’t look good.

“Your Majesty, is he...”

“This is bad! He has no resistance to the Light of Origin! Sidis! Get these guys and Karl out of here!”

If they could at least get the men out of the villa, the ambient castle magic meant to stave off the Light’s power should make things easier for them.

“First things first, Your Majesty,” Sidis interjected. “You need to turn human again and get dressed.”

“Why?”

“It’ll be difficult for me to carry three people at once.” He apparently intended to make the emperor help with the transport.

“Shall I carry one?” Lyse offered. She’d carried Sidis around like a princess before, and she was quite confident she could do the same for at least Karl.

“No.” Sidis instantly shot her down with a severe look. “This isn’t a job for a lady like yourself. Moreover, if there are still any cultists around, I’d like you on point to handle them.”

“Very well...” Lyse sighed. Sidis was just being chivalrous, but she was a bit disappointed. She wanted to contribute in some way.

Seeing her frown, the emperor whispered, “Hey, don’t take it too hard, Lyse.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“He just doesn’t want you touching the guy who tried to steal you from him.”

It took a few seconds for his words to fully register, but when they did, her face heated up a bit. *Lord Sidis just doesn’t want me to touch Lord Karl? He’s just jealous?* It was actually a relief to her that Sidis hadn’t discounted her from the fighting force.

As they prepared to leave, Lyse decided to let the rabbit monster go too. She’d have trouble minding it while trying to keep an eye out for any attacks. She was also curious about what would happen if she let it near the Light. With that thought, however, a question hit her...

“What are we going to do about the Light of Origin wavering?” she asked. How could she send a monster into it without considering that?

“I suspect Karl and these men caused that, but if they don’t remember, we have no way of knowing what they did. There have been cases of monsters jumping into the Light before, but if there’s a chance that’s what happened here, then we should investigate while we have the opportunity.”

With a nod, Lyse let the wiggling bunny monster out of her basket. “You can go to the Light of Origin now,” she told it.

It blinked as if to ask if it was really okay...then leaped into the Light and melted away. It didn’t seem to affect the Light at all.

“So monsters had nothing to do with it, huh?” she sighed.

“That’s good to know. This gives us additional information,” responded Sidis.

“It does?”

“We know that what happened earlier wasn’t just a fluke. You can control monsters. No one else has that power. I’ll try and see if I can emulate it myself, but if you’re the only one...” Sidis then leaned in and whispered in Lyse’s ear, “If that power is uniquely yours, no one will object to our marriage. If you can control monsters, that means you’re perfectly capable of defending yourself too. You’ll be able to fight freely on the front lines.” There, he hugged her. “You won’t need some other man to teach you magic anymore either. I’m glad, because I truly don’t care for it.”

Sidis seemed so relieved on that last point that she felt guilty thinking about all the stress she must have caused him over it. “I’m sorry for putting you through that,” she said.

“But you only did it because you want to stay with me, right?”

“Still...you didn’t like it.” Lyse didn’t want to do anything to upset her fiancé.

“It’s all right. I knew how you felt. I just don’t like seeing anyone else that close to you.”

“Lord Sidis...”

He loosened his embrace and lifted a lock of her hair with a finger. “You belong to me, down to every last strand of hair on your head...”

When Sidis kissed the lock of hair, the emperor loudly cleared his throat. “Save the flirting for later,” he complained.

Sidis let go of Lyse for the time being, looking as if nothing had happened. “Don’t get cranky because you’re jealous, Your Majesty. Besides, these men will survive a little pallor.”

“I never said anything about being jealous. One day, after this all blows over, I’m gonna find a woman who thinks even my dog form is wonderful and will gladly take me on walks.”

“Is that really what you should be looking for in a woman?” Lyse quipped.

The emperor nodded confidently. “Up until now, I’ve never really thought about what I wanted in a wife... But when you were walking me earlier, I started

thinking that someone who accepts me as a dog too would be my ideal partner.”

“A new kink, I see...” muttered Sidis—though thankfully the emperor didn’t hear him.

As Egbert trotted away happily, Lyse and Sidis exchanged forced smiles.

Chapter 5: The Truth Behind the Incident a Hundred Years Prior, and the Culmination of the Incident a Hundred Years Later

The following afternoon, Lyse and Sidis were summoned to the emperor's office to discuss the results of the investigation into Karl and the intruders. Alcede, who had been busy handling the aftermath of the monster attack at the time of the villa break-in, was naturally present as well.

"So Karl doesn't remember a thing either?" Lyse asked.

"If even Sidis's confession magic couldn't get him to reveal anything, then it's rather definitive. They were all hypnotized, just like the attackers in Olwen," Alcede said with a shrug and a sigh. "It's a tad annoying that we have to track down another cultist mastermind. And if it happens to be a noble...we can expect a fight on our hands. What a pain."

"That's true. Unlike back in Olwen, we're potentially dealing with someone who can use strong magic."

"And if there's no easy distinction between sides, the fight involved could get rather messy."

The imperial knights would have a hard time dispatched against the nobility. They were primarily trained to fight monsters. And even in the event they had to subdue citizens for the sake of public safety, magic battles between imperials were exceedingly rare.

"A way to clearly identify the enemy? If only we could mark them somehow..." Lyse murmured innocently.

Hearing this, Sidis looked pensive. "If we need some kind of mark...the monsters should tell us who's carrying the Donan Faith's black stones."

"That's right!" chimed in Alcede.

During the break-in at the villa, Lyse's tamed bird had gone after the black

stone one of the intruders was wearing. It seemed the monsters had the power to sniff them out. As such, the imperial retinue potentially had the ability to ask shrunken monsters to cling to anyone carrying the stones in order to identify them.

“Monsters *did* react to the Donan stones, didn’t they?” the emperor remarked. It seemed he’d had the same idea.

“Using them is a good plan. Yet though it would be all well and good to openly find the culprit, I’d first like to get a sense of whether anyone involved with the cult has access to the palace,” Alcede put forward.

“You mean someone related to Karl?” the emperor asked. “In other words, my sister and her husband.”

The duke nodded in response. Lyse understood the implication.

“I agree that there’s an alarming possibility that the Donan Faith has gotten a hold of their family,” the emperor acknowledged.

It was no secret that Karl wanted more mana, so it wouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone if he’d accepted a stone from the Donans on that pretense. Given his personality and situation, it was also possible that he’d been talked into accepting one from a follower, be it a family member or servant.

“It would be simple enough for someone within their household to get near the Light. It would also be easy to control Karl if they lived in close proximity to him, especially since the cultists can’t put those black stone pillars up here like they could in Olwen,” Egbert continued.

“But how could such a thing have slipped his father’s notice, Your Majesty? He seemed...more than a bit angry after the incident.”

“Oh, Sidis, what an adorably naive way of thinking. The duke may simply be feigning anger to deflect suspicion from himself,” Alcede said with a chuckle before popping a cookie from his stash into his mouth. Upon realizing that he always carried sweets on his person, Lyse grew worried he’d end up diabetic.

“Whatever the case, we should have Lyse tame some more monsters as soon as possible for us,” Sidis suggested.

Nodding, Lyse agreed to venture outside of the capital with him for that express purpose. They'd need to keep the operation quiet.

"As you can't take any knights to guard you, I'll come along," offered Alcede. He'd decided to accompany them in the event they ran into anything Sidis couldn't handle alone.

The emperor, of course, would have to hold the fort at home. "If only I were a dog..." he muttered.

"Every moment you spend playing around as a dog is a moment you aren't getting any work done. Focus on that."

Thus discouraged by Alcede's jibe, Emperor Egbert dejectedly slumped his shoulders in defeat. And with that, the other three set out. At the palace entrance, Lyse realized she was wearing a tense expression and quickly switched back to something neutral—for they'd just run into Duke Lasuarl, who was potentially connected to the Donan Faith.

Alcede smiled and said to him, "Oh my. How wonderful to see you, Duke Lasuarl. Are you on your way to see His Majesty?"

"Yes. I must apologize for my son's misconduct once more."

Despite the circumstances suggesting Karl had not done it of his own volition, the fact remained that he'd sneaked into the villa. Judging by the disdain in his voice, Duke Lasuarl seemed to consider it a rather serious offense.

"It wasn't his fault, of course. He was being controlled... His Majesty is only keeping him for medical observation out of concern for his health. You needn't worry," Alcede replied.

"He was stupid enough let himself *be* controlled. He has no right to call himself my son. Everyone knows what he's done. I plan on disinheriting him as soon as he's recovered."

"Isn't that a bit extreme...?" Alcede, who was doing his best to be polite, looked bewildered.

Regardless of the circumstances, the duke's decision was indeed harsh. Lyse felt something was amiss. *Is he not at all worried about Karl?* she wondered.

Yet as soon as that question crossed her mind, she remembered that Duke Lasuarl had always been bad with children. A century ago, he'd freeze with a terrifying look on his face whenever he fell for one of the young emperor-to-be's pranks. The knights back then had gossiped amongst themselves, saying that the duke didn't know if he should get angry with the boy or where the blame should really fall. And now it seemed he was being strict with his own son out of a similar kind of uncertainty... But still, disinheriting Karl was a leap of extraordinary proportions.

"This is a family matter," Duke Lasuarl insisted. His icy tone, as if he were simply casting aside his kin, was painfully severe.

"Please, at least discuss it with Kirstin. You'll need His Majesty's approval as well, as Karl is a member of the imperial family," Sidis argued.

Forced to concede that much, Duke Lasuarl sighed before changing the subject from his son. "And where might the three of you be headed?" he asked sternly. "You're not taking out a woman who can't even fight a mere day after such a suspicious incident, are you?"

"It will be fine. Sidis and I are with her, after all. And this isn't for leisure. Some people only show their mettle in the face of danger, you know. We're venturing outside of the capital in hopes of drawing out Miss Lyse's true magical potential."

"What... You're taking someone who can't fight to battle monsters?!"

"There's no harm in trying, and it'd be wonderful if it works. Besides, Miss Lyse wants to do this."

Hearing Alcede's explanation, the other duke turned to Lyse with a look of disbelief. Something still seemed odd about him to her, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"If all goes well and Miss Lyse gains the ability to use magic, then she'll be able to protect herself. And no one with ill intentions would dare make another move the day after causing such a tizzy, don't you think?"

"It's far too dangerous! What will you do if she gets hurt?!"

"That would never happen with Sidis in our company. In fact, if we need to be

on guard against the Donan Faith now, I dare say it might be even safer outside of the capital. The cult has managed to infiltrate even the villa now, after all.”

Alcede’s implicit criticism—“with that kind of breach, it’s not exactly safe here either”—made Duke Lasuarl, who was in charge of the palace defenses, look a bit indignant. “Though you may be able to best the enemy, it’s possible that they’ve guessed your thoughts and have an ambush at the ready. And with not one, but *two* members of the imperial family in your company...”

“If our traveling with two members of the imperial family surprises you, I’m quite certain the enemy will never see it coming. They might lower their guard against such a small traveling party. Who knows? They may yet come for revenge,” Alcede said, leaning in close to the duke. “And if they do, we’re bound to catch a few assailants to interrogate properly this time. We may even learn something about yesterday’s attack. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Alcede had a reply for everything, putting an annoyed grimace on Duke Lasuarl’s face. “You’ve always had a silver tongue...” he said with a scowl.

“All the better to serve His Majesty with,” Alcede replied, stepping back nonchalantly. “Now then, if you’ll excuse us...”

With a smile and a bow, Alcede began to walk away. Sidis followed, passing Duke Lasuarl and pulling Lyse along with him. She turned to look back after a few steps, but the duke had already disappeared into the palace.

Once they were certain to be out of earshot, Alcede addressed Sidis. “Duke Lasuarl really came at us there, didn’t he?”

“I didn’t particularly find anything he said to be out of line...”

While Sidis looked a bit confused, Alcede was all smirks. “Honestly, who in the world would be worried about someone with two members of the imperial family there to protect them? Even if he was just being overprotective of Miss Lyse...it was a bit much.”

From Lyse’s point of view, Alcede had been the one prickling at Duke Lasuarl. She cocked her head in puzzlement, and it seemed Sidis felt much the same way.

“What are you thinking, Alcede? Do you stand to gain something by picking a

fight with him?”

“I thought he might spill a secret or two if I hit him where it hurt, but alas, the endeavor bore little fruit. The most we’ve learned is that his son doesn’t mean much to him.”

So even Alcede had thought the duke was being rather callous. Lyse figured, then, that there was more to it than just Lasuarl being bad with children.

“He prizes nothing more than the strength of one’s mana, after all,” said Sidis. “Perhaps he was just excessively worried due to Lyse’s inability to use magic... Still, more and more people are rallying against his obsession with mana.”

“Indeed. He places too much importance on magical skill—it matters even more to him than loyalty to the crown when he’s bringing people into the palace. Thanks to that, security isn’t what it used to be. We’ll have a serious problem on our hands if we end up with knights who won’t follow His Majesty’s orders in an emergency,” Alcede pointed out. He then continued, “Although no one would ever object to the villa guards being chosen based on skill.”

Based on the conversation, Lyse could tell that Duke Lasuarl’s fixation on mana had grown in the past hundred years. *He was strict before, but that was it. So why...* Wonder though she might, there was no way for her to know. As she pondered the answer, a knight approached the trio with two riding raptors. Alcede mounted one, and Sidis and Lyse the other before taking flight and departing the palace northward.

The imperial capital was arranged in a semicircle with the Light of Origin at the center, then the villa, the palace, and the city in concentric arcs moving outward from there. North of the Light of Origin was a stretch of forest at the foot of a sheer mountain precipice. Imperial knights used monster-repelling magic and patrolled the sky here regularly. There was a garrison beyond the sheer cliff to keep the monsters at bay, and past that was considered monster territory. This was where the trio touched down.

“I’ll try touching one first,” Sidis said.

“Very well. You can leave protecting the raptors and Miss Lyse to me,” Alcede assured him.

With that, Sidis began moving away from Lyse and Alcede to approach a nearby reptilian monster. It stood still with its body close to the ground until it noticed Sidis, then moved toward him. Monsters were naturally aggressive with people. Sidis quickly moved to meet it. When the monster stood up to human height and revealed its claws, Sidis swiftly dove in and touched its body before ducking back out again. The lizard monster and Sidis both backed off before facing each other once more.

“And the results are...” murmured Alcede in a relaxed manner as he and Lyse watched on.

The monster charged at Sidis. When it came for him, he blasted it with magic and it disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“It seems that it only works for Lyse,” Sidis concluded before suggesting they move on. “Next is your turn. Two should be enough.”

The group then waited for more monsters to show up. While they stood there serenaded by the sound of Alcede crunching on sweets, Sidis muttered, “Whatever the case, I’m glad that you’ve got another way to fight, Lyse.”

“Though it isn’t magic,” she replied with a strained smile.

Learning how to use magic properly would have been ideal. She was already familiar with it from her past life, which would make it much faster to imagine a formula and cast from that. And even if controlling monsters was a great power, she still had to catch them first. Nevertheless, she decided, there was no need to get hung up on it.

“With monsters, I won’t need someone to protect me at all times, even if I have the Light. The other members of the imperial family won’t need to concern themselves about our engagement anymore either,” she said. “We can simply refuse now.”

“That’s right. They can no longer demand we marry other people,” Sidis said with a bit of a relieved smile, though it was hard to say that he looked entirely uplifted.

“Um, is something still bothering you?” Lyse asked.

“I was just thinking about how the Light can’t be used for magic. If it’s not

mana, then what about your...”

“My what?”

“Your lifespan.”

Lyse responded with a sage nod, understanding what he meant. He’d only brought it up but once before—the fact that his lifespan and hers might be different. Sidis had said that, in marrying, he wanted to spend their lives together...and he’d said it with such a forlorn expression. Lyse had simply agreed at the time and never brought up since, not wishing to see him so sad again. There was a considerable chance that there was a disparity between their life expectancies, and that Sidis would inevitably be the one left behind. That seemed to have weighed on his mind all this time.

Lyse couldn’t stop thinking about it either. Regardless of all else, Sidis aged slowly. In just a few years’ time, she would look older than him. Eventually, they’d look like parent and child... Would Sidis feel the same way about her then? If they had children, would she be able to handle leaving them when they were still so young? But of all the thoughts that kept nagging at Lyse, one persisted above all else. This was her second shot at life, and she’d finally found someone she loved. So even if the future was frightening and uncertain, she wasn’t going to walk away from him.

“I’ve aged normally my entire life, so as long as the Light of Origin inside of me doesn’t change functionally, I think I’ll continue to do so. But...” Lyse continued, “I’ll be with you until the end. I resolved myself to as much when I agreed to marry you. So, please, do the same for me.”

“Lyse...” Sidis took her hand and interlaced his fingers with hers. Just as she was getting a bit bashful about it...

“That’s enough, you two. Save the lovey-dovey act for later. It looks like we’ve got a bite,” Alcede cut in, pointing to the right as he stuffed his empty candy bag back into his pocket.

There were holes opening in a rough patch of earth with little grass. Lyse observed this, and as she did, one hole suddenly yawned large enough to swallow a person. Out of it hopped the same kind of black rabbit monster she’d caught the other day. When all three appeared, she eagerly began walking

toward them.

“I’ll keep the other two busy,” Sidis offered considerately. That would make it easier for Lyse to get close to the third.

“Thank you,” she replied.

She then charged at the nearest monster. The rabbit likewise leaped at her. She judged where it would land and reached out for it after barely dodging. The instant she touched it, it flopped down on the ground, docile.

“That’s one!”

Next, she made a dash for one of the two monsters Sidis was occupying. She touched it from behind while it was distracted. The last one then noticed her and charged, but Sidis held it down for her so she could touch its midsection.

“Wonderful, Miss Lyse!” shouted Alcede, clapping.

“Oh, I think most imperial women would be able to do that,” she replied.

“Most would rely on magic. They wouldn’t be able to perform such physical feats with that kind of aplomb. Nevertheless, I’m pleased we made quick work of that.” Alcede smirked. “Duke Lasuarl should still be in the palace. Let us investigate him and anyone else in the Lasuarl family who might be close to Karl posthaste.”

Nodding, Lyse asked the three monsters she’d just caught to shrink down before packing them inside a small bag she’d brought along. She, Sidis, and Alcede then hurried back to the palace.

“Didn’t go so well, did it?” said Duke Lasuarl sarcastically when they crossed paths again in the palace hall. Since the group looked disappointed, he presumed they’d failed.

Alcede offered no reply. Before they’d arrived, Sidis had ordered him to keep quiet. As they’d left in such high spirits and come back seemingly empty-handed, it might raise eyebrows if he continued being snippy.

Taking his silence as a sign, Duke Lasuarl seemed to decide he had no more to say to him either. He then moved on to Lyse. “Even if you cannot use magic, that doesn’t change the fact that you’re important to the empire. As long as you

remain within the palace, I can promise you that we'll do all we can to keep you safe, so don't worry," he said before walking away.

The group kept up their grim act for another twenty paces or so before whispering to each other as they stepped out of the hall.

"Any movement, Lyse?" Sidis asked.

"How are the monsters?" Alcede likewise inquired.

"They didn't react at all," she answered, opening the buttoned flap of the bag to show the men. Within were three small rabbit monsters, all nestled together quietly.

"So Duke Lasuarl wasn't involved?" Lyse mused.

"I'd say it's too soon to make such a definitive declaration. Even if he's not carrying a stone, he could still be in league with them. We cannot clear anyone's name until we find a culprit who *gives* us names."

"How very cautious, Your Grace."

"But of course. If we inadvertently let someone slip past us and the events of Olwen repeated themselves here at the palace..." Alcede shuddered as he spoke. "Thinking about how much work that would make for me is positively dreadful!"

"*That's* what you're worried about?"

"That's just the kind of man he is." Despite Sidis sounding a bit fed up with him, the fact that Alcede was being so forthright about the issue at least meant he was taking it seriously. "Now, let's move on to the next step. Alcede, go report this all to His Majesty."

There, Sidis and Lyse parted ways with Alcede and headed to the left wing of the palace that contained guest housing. Their destination was Karl's room.

He was being held in the palace after trespassing into the villa. But unlike the other two intruders, he was a member of the imperial family, so he was only being kept under watch in a guest room. The emperor was also allowing him visitors in hopes that his Donan connection would come to see him. Lyse wanted to investigate not just Karl, but his mother and the servants who came

and went with her.

Sidis and Lyse knew Karl's room immediately by the two guards posted outside of it. The very moment they arrived at the door, Kirstin walked out.

"Oh my," she said, walking up to the couple.

"Hello, Kirstin. How is Karl doing? I hope he isn't experiencing any lingering effects from being unconscious for so long," Sidis said lightly, acting perfectly natural. Lyse also greeted the duchess, making sure to reveal nothing in her expression. They couldn't betray that Kirstin was under suspicion.

"Indeed, he seems to be fine... I'm very sorry for the trouble he's caused, Sidis."

"I'm just glad we found him quickly. It's always been dangerous for him to be so close to the Light."

"Thank you, truly. But I do wish he could recall even an inkling of why he went to the villa in the first place."

Pursing her lips and casting her eyes downward, Kirstin seemed quite genuine. Lyse was beginning to worry, however, about going pale herself. She was holding the closed cloth bag tight and could feel the rabbit monsters moving around inside. They wanted out, which meant Kirstin...

Subtly trying to alert Sidis, Lyse tugged on the hem of his coat. When he turned to look at her, she said, "Do you think we could ask Lady Kirstin about how Lord Karl was acting on the day of the incident? Maybe in another room?"

"But I told them everything yesterday..." Kirstin responded when she heard this.

"I've been seeing Lord Karl daily recently, and he seemed a bit strange the day before," replied Lyse. "I was just wondering if there might have been any clues I missed in his behavior that you may have noticed at home."

Sidis nodded along with the excuse Lyse thought up. "If we want to examine the information carefully, it would be best to consider it from all angles. And if we can get any leads on whoever lured him into doing this, wouldn't that be for the best?"

That gave Kirstin just the push she needed, and she agreed to follow them to the emperor's office. As they walked, Lyse grew more and more anxious. What if Kirstin realized something was up and tried to flee? Would she have to use her monsters to stop her?

As they walked the corridors and entered the central building, Lyse pondered all the different ways this could go wrong, but the group made it safely to the emperor's office without issue. Once they were inside and the other officials had cleared the room, she finally let her guard down. She ended up letting her hand drift away from the bag...and the moment she did, the rabbits started to slip out.

"Wait, no!" Lyse couldn't stop them fast enough. One jumped past her, up onto Kirstin's shoulder

"Eeeeeek! What is this?!" she cried, trying to brush away the black thing suddenly clinging to her.

The monster skillfully dodged her hand and crawled down her right arm. Its target was the silver bracelet on her wrist, and the monster sunk its fangs into the bracelet with a scratching sound.

"Don't eat it!" Lyse ordered loudly, and the rabbit monster finally relented. When she rushed to pull it off the duchess, it squeaked sadly. It must have really wanted to eat the bracelet, but they needed it as evidence.

"Wh-What? What *is* that thing?! Isn't that a monster?!" Kirstin shrieked.

As she rushed to get away from Lyse, the emperor stood and grabbed her arm. "Kirstin, in addition to explaining all this, there are some things we need to ask you."

"...What?" Turning toward her brother, she looked as if she didn't understand what was happening.

"First, where did you get that?" Emperor Egbert asked, pointing to her bracelet.

The thick, simple piece of engraved jewelry...had a black stone poking out right where the monster had chomped down.

“Under the plating is the same kind of stone that the Donan Faith uses to control people,” Sidis explained.

“That... That can’t be...” Despite what she was saying, Kirstin’s eyes were darting about in search of escape. She looked as though she knew something but was trying to hide it.

Sidis hammered the final nail into the coffin. “I can prove it. Watch to see if it breaks when I touch it,” he said, putting his hand to the bracelet.

A breath later, it split from the inside out and dropped to the floor. Seeing this, Kirstin bit her lip, mortified.

“Kirstin, the creature Lyse is holding is a monster. It seems they have the ability to sniff out the Donan Faith’s stones. Where did you get that bracelet? Did someone give it to you?” Sidis asked carefully.

Kirstin’s lips quivered, but she said nothing.

“If you do not answer, we’ll have no choice but to take you into custody. The stone in this bracelet was hidden beneath the plating. I don’t want to think that you procured it yourself. Would you please tell us how you came by it?”

“Kirstin...” The emperor released her arm before taking her hand unadorned by the bracelet. The warmth of his hands seemed to snap her back to reality, as she looked at her younger brother with a start. “Please tell us. This might be relevant to more than just yesterday’s incident. It might have something to do with what happened a hundred years ago when Sidis was nearly killed.”

Though the emperor begged her, Kirstin simply looked away.

“Do you remember the sword the intruder was carrying back then? You were there yourself. You must have seen that black blade. It was likely made from the Donan Faith’s stone as well. Given that he was able to sneak into the imperial villa, the Donans most likely had already wormed their way into the aristocracy back then too. If you tell us where the bracelet came from, we might be able to find who’s responsible... It’s the least you can do for the knight who gave her life that day.”

Lyse, the very knight he was talking about, stared at Kirstin as she waited for an answer...but the duchess remained silent, her eyes locked on the floor.

Emperor Egbert's tone grew sharper. "I need you to be honest."



“Kirstin, please...”

When even Sidis, who’d nearly died that day, begged her, Kirstin grew teary-eyed and finally spoke up. “I’m sorry, Sidis...” Her braceleted hand flew up to cover half of her face. “What happened a hundred years ago... It was all because of me!”

Under the watchful eyes of Lyse and the two men, Kirstin confessed everything.

“Are you all right, Lord Sidis?” Lyse asked when it was all over. Though a servant had brought them tea, he hadn’t touched his.

After hearing everything Kirstin had to say and Sidis used his confession magic to make sure she wasn’t lying, the emperor had used contract magic to ensure Kirstin couldn’t speak of what had transpired and then sent her home. They didn’t want to alert any of the Donan faithful who might be coming and going from the ducal estate that anything was afoot.

Following that, Lyse and Sidis had returned to his room where they were now seated on the couch, but Sidis hardly seemed relieved. He’d managed to keep his cool in front of Kirstin and carry himself normally. But the moment she was gone, he spaced out as if completely spent. The emperor had thus told him to retire and get some rest.

He’d then turned to Lyse and said, *“Really, this might be the biggest shock to you...”* And he was right. She’d lost her life during the incident in question, after all. Not even Lyse had any idea how she was remaining so calm now, but there was one thought that pervaded her mind...

“I’m glad that Lady Kirstin didn’t have a hand in what happened, even if it was for her sake.”

At this, Sidis slowly raised his head. “Why... Why aren’t you angry?” Just that seemed to bring his pent-up feelings to the surface. His expression went sour. “Even if she wasn’t directly involved, because of her...you died.”

Lyse thought back to Kirstin’s confession: *“It was all for me. Because I...don’t have much mana.”*

The duchess possessed remarkably little mana for a member of the imperial family—far less than Egbert and the others believed. The previous emperor and empress had known and chosen to raise her normally regardless. Despite only being able to stay a total of three days, she could still visit the villa, and her parents managed to hide her lack of mana with various excuses, so no one ever came to learn the truth.

But things changed as Kirstin grew older. Egbert was born with mana befitting a candidate for the throne, and then their cousin Sidis showed especially strong mana for a member of the imperial family. Back then, Kirstin realized that people were comparing them—especially the servants. The lower their rank, the more problems they had with the princess being weak. They despised serving her.

Kirstin's nanny had always worried about her lack of mana—especially the fact that, despite being able to enter the villa, she would always arrive late or fake being sick to return to the palace proper early. The nanny was terrified that other people might find out about Kirstin's lack of mana and expel her from the imperial family for it. That would never happen, of course, but the nanny—who was a lower-born noble—didn't understand the nuances of how the top-ruling aristocracy regarded the issue.

In the midst of all her fretting, she heard about a stone that strengthened mana from a certain merchant. Grasping at straws, she gave one to the young Kirstin as a secret good luck charm and told her not to tell anyone about it. Kirstin's life wasn't an easy one. As a princess, she saw more of her nanny and other servants than she did her own parents...so she readily believed the nanny when she said she might be expelled from the imperial family if she didn't boost her mana.

Her nanny was the only person who'd ever promised to protect her, no matter what, so Kirstin did as she was told and held on to the charm. Thanks to it, she stopped finding it hard to breathe in the villa after just three days. The emperor and empress were delighted to see her completely fine on day four. And when she realized that she could stay for an entire week without issue, Kirstin was innocently thrilled. Believing it was all because of her nanny's charm, she kept the black stone safely hidden under her clothes so that no one

would see it.

But then...the incident occurred.

Kirstin was there to witness Qatora's death, and seeing the black sword wielded by the culprit made her feel a bit uneasy. Wasn't it made of the same stone as her charm? Qatora had been too busy to notice and Sidis too young to care, so neither of them now recalled that the culprit had worn a black stone pendant as well.

The culprit, his sword, and Qatora were all swallowed by the Light of Origin. Yet once they disappeared inside of it, a strong gust of wind blew forth with the pendant that had been ripped off the intruder in the struggle. It landed close enough for Kirstin to pick it up, and she immediately went to ask her nanny why that man had been wearing the same kind of charm. Was she the one who'd let him into the villa?

There, the nanny confessed everything. She'd been given the stone in return for allowing the intruder inside the palace. After apologizing for committing such a crime for the young princess's sake, the nanny left her position under the pretext of taking ill. Kirstin, now young and alone, couldn't bring herself to tell anyone that she was the reason a kind knight was dead and her beloved cousin bedridden. With her nanny gone, she was terrified that her parents might abandon her too.

But still, as long as she had the stone with her, she could stay in the villa comfortably. If she suddenly went back to only being able to spend a couple of days there, people would grow suspicious. In order to prevent that, she kept the stone—and the truth of the incident—to herself. That was the story Kirstin told them.

Lyse was stunned. At first she couldn't wrap her head around it. She'd never imagined that she'd uncover the cause of the incident that ended her past life so soon. Once she processed everything Kirstin had said, however, she didn't know how to respond. She wasn't angry; she just had some pent-up emotions. Kirstin was none the wiser about Lyse's true identity. If she told the duchess that she was Qatora's reincarnation...rather than taking comfort in it, she'd be horrified.

Moreover, Lyse was upset with herself for not having noticed anything back then. All she'd cared about in those days was training, her duties, and chasing the princes around. If even one adult had realized the torment Kirstin was suffering at the time... Still, it was a century ago. There was nothing Lyse could do about it at present. Her biggest concern now was Sidis.

When she glanced over at him, he seemed at a bit of a loss. He was looking down at Kirstin, who had fallen to her knees. There was no hate in his eyes, even after hearing the truth. Kirstin hadn't meant to hurt anyone. And her nanny had only done what she had out of love for Kirstin. She wasn't to be blamed for her ignorance as a lesser noble either.

"Where is your nanny now, Kirstin?" Emperor Egbert asked his sister after everything.

"I heard that she passed ten years after leaving the palace... Illness, they said."

The emperor only offered a solemn nod in reply.

Sidis remained silent afterward, even now in his own room. All this time, he'd been pondering his own emotions—as well as Lyse's. She took a single deep breath and slowly, finally, answered him on the matter.

"I'm not angry," she said. "I was just thinking that if she'd spoken up sooner, we would have caught on to the Donan Faith much earlier."

"That's it?" Sidis asked.

Lyse nodded. "That's it. I'm surprised myself. But it might simply be because, while I was vexed by the trauma you were forced to endure, I was satisfied that I'd done my duty."

She was angry that a small child had gotten caught in the middle of such a terrible incident. If Qatora hadn't been able to save him, she would regret it to this day. She'd most likely be furious with Kirstin.

"But I saved you, and you're still doing fine to this day. Besides, you aren't angry with her either, are you?"

Sidis's eyes wandered awkwardly. "I never knew that Kirstin and those close to her were under that kind of pressure... The former emperor and empress—and even His Majesty now—have never treated her any differently. Most of the rest of the palace follows their example."

That was why he—and many others—had never realized it was an issue. Generally speaking, the palace didn't pay any mind to what the servants were saying. Qatora was guilty of this as well. In her time, she mainly dealt with other knights and the ladies-in-waiting that she'd served alongside. She hadn't had much interaction with the servants. Sidis and Emperor Egbert probably hadn't either, as they would have been attended by imperial chamberlains as young princes. It had left them all oblivious.

Lyse broke out into a smile. "I'm glad you're still the same gentle person you always were. I feel terrible for Kirstin too. I should have been there for her."

"That wasn't your responsibility. As Qatora, you were always busy taking care of His Majesty and myself on top of your duties as a knight. We had a nanny as well, but she was elderly and His Majesty loved giving her a hard time."

"That's right... She always had her hands full with him, didn't she?"

Until the day the empress had told her just to leave the princes be if they were going to be such little rascals, the poor nanny had always been out of breath chasing after them. When Qatora offered to step in and catch them for her, the elderly woman had profusely thanked her. She'd even regularly given Qatora sweets as a token of her gratitude. Qatora rarely ate sweets, however, so she'd usually either take them home for her mother or share them with her lady-in-waiting acquaintances. The memories of it put a nostalgic smile on Lyse's face...and Sidis suddenly hugged her from where he sat beside her on the sofa.

"Lord Sidis..."

"Still, I was devastated to lose you. If I'd heard what I just did fifty years ago, I don't know how I might have reacted in my rage," he said miserably, tightening his arms around Lyse. "I'm so glad I found you. It's only because you were reborn that I'm able to sympathize with Kirstin now."

Just when she thought he was about to let her go, he put a hand to her cheek

and lifted her face. Then he kissed her. First on the forehead, then on her reflexively closed eyelids, and finally on her lips. His kisses were so light that he always pulled back before Lyse could wiggle away in embarrassment, then leaned in for another.

Afterward, Sidis smiled a little. “And there’s one good thing that’s come of your reincarnation.”

“Huh, what?”

“If you were still Qatora, I don’t think you ever would have quietly let me hug you like this.”

Lyse burst out laughing. He was probably right. If she were still Qatora, she wouldn’t have seen him as anything but a little brother. She would have brushed off his confessions of love. When Lyse was in his arms like this, she was absolutely sure that she was a lot milder now than she ever had been in her past life.

Regardless, however, even though they’d now come to the truth behind the incident a hundred years prior, it didn’t change the fact that they had no leads about the current one.

The next morning, Lyse went about her duties as a lady-in-waiting. The emperor tasked her with delivering a letter for him, so she was presently making her way through the palace. Of the monsters she’d captured the day before, one was with Sidis and another with Alcede as an experiment. They wanted to see if the monsters would continue to obey Lyse’s orders even when away from her, and if so, for how long. It was Alcede’s suggestion, of course.

The third and final monster was in the pocket of Lyse’s gown, both to help find clues and to help protect Lyse in the event she was targeted. There was no sign of any such foul play at the moment, however, as there was a high chance that the Donan Faith had yet to realize that she was capable of destroying their precious black stones. Sidis had nevertheless asked her to be vigilant a great many times, and his concern had had an influence on her.

As she walked the palace halls, she could see someone approaching her from down the way. It was a black-haired man with a stand-up collar jacket—Lawry.

Lyse braced herself, as she considered him someone to be particularly on guard against. He was always with Karl, who'd gotten a hold of a Donan stone somehow. That meant there was a nonzero chance that Lawry was involved with the cult, and even if he wasn't, he may know something about how they'd gotten to Karl.

Lawry jogged up to Lyse as soon as he saw her, worry writ across his face. "Miss Lyse!" he hailed. "I heard you were safe, but are you truly uninjured?"

"What?" Lyse had no idea what he was talking about.

When she looked confused, he clarified, "They said you went to battle monsters, believing that a lack of pressing danger was inhibiting your magical development. The very thought of forcing such a training method on a foreign woman... Forgive my insolence, but I was most concerned when Lord Karl told me."

Ah, so that's what this is about. Lawry had heard about their conversation with Duke Lasuarl via Karl. He also seemed to be under the impression that, as a woman from another country, she was wholly unused to combat.

I carry a sword as a lady-in-waiting, but I guess he thinks it's just for show. Lyse was a bit put off, but she couldn't let that show. If Lawry turned out to be an enemy, he'd be a lot easier to deal with if he underestimated her, after all.

"I appreciate your concern," she said, "but I had proper protection."

"Heavens! It was terrible of them to take a woman who can't even fight into battle in the first place."

Lawry couldn't possibly know how Lyse truly felt. She understood that, yet she still ended up responding a bit indignantly, "I have some training with a blade, and being able to use magic would make it easier for me to stay safely by my fiancé's side. I had them take me out of my own accord."

"You love him that much, do you?" Lawry said sadly, almost pityingly.

Lyse didn't know how to respond. It was still hard for her to openly declare her love in front of other people. When she stopped to think about it, she had no idea how Sidis managed to blab such sweet words in public. While she was wondering about that, she moved her hand to her pocket...and the monster

inside didn't move an inch. That meant Lawry wasn't carrying one of the Donan stones.

Feeling slightly disappointed, Lyse brought her conversation with him to a close and then went on her way. Once she'd delivered the letter to a noble staying in the guest wing, she headed back to the emperor's office, where Alcede and Sidis had just arrived.

"Great timing. Let's discuss our next move," the emperor suggested. With that, the four of them took a seat upon two sofas facing each other. Once the chamberlains cleared the room, Emperor Egbert began, "We learned what really happened a hundred years ago from Kirstin yesterday, so the question now is whether or not the Donans have anything to do with her in the present day."

"If this incident is related to the one a hundred years ago, then..." Sidis muttered.

"Personally, I don't think it is," Alcede cut in, dropping his gaze to the tabletop in front of him as he pulled a bag of sweets from his pocket.

"Why?" Sidis asked.

"It's been a century since and the only stone Lady Kirstin's received was the one from her nanny. So, seeing as the cult hasn't made any other contact with her... Well, it's a matter of lifespan."

"Lifespan?" Sidis repeated.

Alcede grinned in reply. "Consider what happened in Olwen, if you will. The cultists there who could use magic all had very weak mana, which wouldn't do much to slow their aging. So by extension, those who were invested in Lady Kirstin back in the day have long died of old age. The Donans currently active in the Razanate Empire should be about two generations removed from them."

"Moreover," he continued, "the nanny who was Lady Kirstin's link to the cult left the palace shortly after the incident. Even if the Donans kept in contact with her, nothing has happened since. So doesn't that suggest they've no intermediary to let them in the palace now? By my guess, that's precisely why they wormed their way into the Lasuarl family—to get a new one." Having

spoken for so long, Alcede took a break to partake in the sweets and tea that had been prepared for the group.

“If that’s all true, we’ve no way of uncovering anything short of going to their manor and investigating...”

“It would be best if I went,” Lyse said, thinking of her unconventional stone detector.

“If we do that, the enemy will realize we’re onto them. I don’t want to let them get away,” Sidis said with a scowl. “But it’ll be hard to concoct a reason for myself or Alcede to go.”

If they were going to investigate the Lasuarl family, they’d need to take the monsters along and figure out who had the stones. But since Karl was being held at the palace, they couldn’t visit under the pretext of seeing him. If they said they were visiting Kirstin instead, it would be strange for Sidis to be in company, as he and Kirstin were currently locked in an antagonistic dispute about his engagement to Lyse. And if they outright stated they were there for an investigation, it would make more sense to bring in the palace guard. Announcing that as the reason for their visit would only put the enemy on the defensive.

“How were your monsters?” Lyse asked, curious about the ones Alcede and Sidis had been carrying around. She received two awkward looks in reply.

“They were quiet, so I believe they’ll be all right around the palace. But taking them past the gardens to the furthest reaches of the grounds is difficult. They get fussy and...bigger,” Sidis said, pulling a pudgy rabbit monster from his coat pocket.

It was about three times its original size. Lyse had been wondering what Sidis had in his pocket to make it bulge so, but the monster was apparently the cause.

“It was the same for me. I was going here and there, but it just kept growing when I got too far away. It ended up this size around the gate,” Alcede sighed. His monster, which was about five times bigger than Lyse’s, was hidden in the shadows of his cape.

They lined the three bunny monsters up on the table, small, medium, and large... The sight was strangely cute. Alcede held out a glowing finger toward them, and when he did, they all toddled over to him and rubbed their heads against the light.

It appeared that monsters normally subsisted off of mana. The group had been “feeding” them in this fashion for the past two days without a problem, so they hypothesized that they were absorbing and consuming Alcede’s mana. He seemed to have fun doing it too, like he was taking care of pets.

“Whatever the case, it’ll be hard for the two of us to continue carrying them around to investigate. We’ll have to go the straightforward route of reviewing records of all who come and go from the ducal manor. I’ll proceed with the inquiry, Your Majesty,” offered Alcede.

“Very well,” Emperor Egbert replied with a nod, formally putting the matter in Alcede’s hands. “I must say I’m quite baffled. Why are they targeting the pillar again like they did a century ago? What in the world is their goal? I wish my sister had known.”

Alcede wagged his index finger at the emperor’s lamentations. “I’ve done a bit of thinking, and maybe... This is just a guess, but maybe...”

“What?” the emperor asked. All eyes fell on the duke.

“What if they’re trying to weaken the Light?” he asked them all in turn.

“Weaken the Light?”

“It’s possible. If we consider that was the Donan Faith’s goal a hundred years ago, it’s possible that it hasn’t changed, Your Majesty.”

“Thinking back on it, that very well may be,” the emperor assented. It would explain why the Donans had risked the dangers of sneaking into the imperial villa when they were otherwise so disgusted with the Light—it was their chance to compromise it. “But I don’t recall there having been any changes in the Light since then.”

“Publicly, no,” remarked Alcede.

“Publicly?” Lyse asked. And she wasn’t the only one puzzled by his remark.

The emperor and Sidis both cocked their heads as well.

“Hasn’t the number of children born with weak mana grown over the past century?”

“Karl was born fifty years ago, and Duke Naglfar’s daughter sixty...” the emperor rattled off.

“The son of the Ydalirl family is thirty, and I recall that Örm’t’s child is seventy,” Alcede added. “They all fit the time frame. We can’t be sure of anything without looking into lesser noble families as well, but it’s worth considering.”

“Then check it out in detail,” ordered the emperor. “Even if it’s not because of the Light, we might uncover something else that’s been going on for the past hundred years.”

“That’s something else to think about.”

If the incident had caused a decline in the mana of imperial children, Lyse was worried that Kirstin would take this news particularly hard. If what her nanny had done for her sake had taken such a toll on her own son and others... Would it not also sour Karl’s relationship with his mother?

I don’t want to see either of them hurt...

She’d known Kirstin since she was a child, and Lyse couldn’t help but see Karl as a child as well. She tended to view the people in the palace through Qatora’s eyes still.

“Now, even if we continue with the investigation, what are we going to do about your engagement ceremony?” asked Alcede. “No one should be able to object thanks to Miss Lyse’s newfound power to control monsters.”

The reason the imperial family had raised concerns about Lyse’s engagement to Sidis in the first place was that she couldn’t defend herself with anything but a sword. If she were ever targeted by the Donan Faith, she would be utterly dependent on other members of the imperial family to protect her. They’d leveraged that as an excuse, claiming that the empire would be better off if she and Sidis both married other people. The best way to change their minds was for Lyse to learn attack magic, and revisiting the matter had been postponed

until she had a fair chance to train up her magic. But now that she could control monsters, no one should object to her ability to protect herself—even without magic.

“To be as careful as possible, we shouldn’t make it public that her new ability is because of the Light. Instead, it might be best to claim it’s a new type of magic,” the duke suggested.

“Agreed. If it’s a rare magic, that’d be perfect. Let us get the engagement ceremony over with before any other problems arise,” said the emperor.

“When?” asked Sidis.

Lyse was slightly embarrassed by how eager he sounded. She was glad that he was happy...but this was still going to take some getting used to.

“You’ve already got preparations underway, don’t you, Sidis? We can schedule it based on how those are coming along. Have you outfits picked out?” asked Emperor Egbert, worrying about the details like a good older brother.

“I began preparations back when we were in Olwen. We had to remeasure Lyse for her dress once we returned to the empire, but it should be ready next week,” responded Sidis.

The fact he even had her clothing all planned out made Lyse squirm a bit. She liked getting dressed up, but she didn’t know anything about current trends in the empire. Sidis’s engagement was a big event in high society, however. Not only was he an important member of the imperial family, but he was also publicly the only Light bearer. The rest of the imperial family had demanded that they hold the ceremony at the palace, and they’d already chosen the reception hall for the venue.

Because of the grandiosity of the affair, Lyse had wanted to ask a dressmaker to go with the safest design possible, but Sidis had stepped in. *“Let me handle this. I want the perfect dress made for you,”* he said. He’d then picked out the silhouette, fabric, color, and every other little detail of the dress. At the time, Lyse had recalled Qatora’s perfectly preserved dresses in his room and couldn’t help wondering, at least a little bit... *Surely not, but what if Lord Sidis really does like women’s clothing?*

“We’ll need to send out invitations to the nobility... Oh, but since not everyone will want to attend, we won’t have to wait for a date which everyone can agree to. We’ll need to host a formal announcement party as well. All in all, I’d say two weeks down the road is the earliest we can arrange to hold the ceremony,” Alcede estimated.

Emperor Egbert nodded. “Would two weeks suit you, then?”

“Of course,” Sidis replied immediately.

“Y-Yes,” Lyse agreed too.

“If Miss Lyse can keep the monsters under her control until then, I’d say it significantly increases the odds that she can keep them indefinitely. But if you’re worried, it may be a good idea to swap them out,” suggested Alcede as he poked the biggest monster on the table. Having been sitting quietly all this time, it suddenly turned and stared up at the duke. “Er, I’m sorry...” After Alcede apologized, the bunny monster turned back around.

“Should we reveal the monsters at the engagement ceremony?” Sidis asked. “There are some people who must see in order to believe.”

“I think it’d be better to show them off at the announcement party! There’ll be people choking on their food if they get a look at these little guys while they’re eating,” chuckled the emperor, imagining the scene. It seemed he still loved a good prank.

Alcede flashed a wicked grin. “Why don’t we wait to show them off until just before the engagement ceremony? That should silence any nobles who come early to object. They’ll certainly leave Miss Lyse alone, just like Sidis wants.”

“So we’re basically threatening them...?” Lyse asked in puzzlement.

“That’s all well and good, but then not all of the nobles would get a chance to see them. Wouldn’t it be best just to have the monsters attend the ceremony?”

“That’s all well and good,” Lord Sidis? Lyse resisted the urge to retort before another thought crossed her mind. *Having monsters attend the ceremony and threatening other nobles? Wouldn’t impressing them be better...?*

“Having the monsters attend is a great idea!” agreed Alcede.

Lyse raised her hand and asked, “Um, why don’t we catch them off guard instead?”

“Catch them off guard?” Sidis repeated as all three men turned to look at her.

“Yes, in order to find the culprit.”

“Tell us your plan,” Emperor Egbert said, urging her to continue.

“We’ll let everyone know beforehand that my monsters react to the stones. I’ll openly walk around with them for the two weeks leading up to the ceremony. On top of that, we’ll demonstrate how the monsters can find the stones and disappear after eating them. That way, everyone will see that I can use the monsters to identify members of the Donan Faith. Then—and this is the key part—we say that I won’t be bringing them to the ceremony.”

“Why?” Alcede asked, leaning in close in anticipation.

“If they know my monsters can find the stones, then the cultists will probably want to eliminate me. The stones are how they control people and various other things, after all.” In truth, they would probably find her ability to sniff out the stones more dangerous than her ability to break them, as it could blow their cover in many situations. “So if we tell them that I *won’t* be bringing my monsters along to the ceremony, they’ll see it as their big chance. Don’t you think they’d use nobles holding stones or other servants to attack me then?”

“And that’s where we’d catch them, eh?” the duke surmised.

Lyse nodded in response. “Yes. We’ll actually have tiny monsters on standby. If this is similar to what happened in Olwen, the mastermind controlling all the followers should be somewhere nearby. They should be carrying a stone too, so if we use the monsters to search in and around the venue, we should be able to find them.”

Basically, Lyse was volunteering herself as bait. If they could catch the mastermind this way, they should be able to learn the location of the Donan Faith’s bases and round up all the cultists. Lyse’s plan was an incredible one, and hearing it, the three men fell silent.

“Taking care of them in one fell swoop would be fantastic...” Alcede, the first to speak up, said rather hesitantly. “But are you truly okay with this, Miss Lyse?”

“If we can take care of them all at once, things will be a lot safer for me after the fact.”

“Still, we don’t know how the enemy may respond. If anything were to happen to you...” Sidis looked distressed as he held Lyse’s hand.

“I’m glad you care so much about me, but I have a way to protect myself other than the sword now. Having monsters means we have more eyes too.” The monsters would attack or defend on command, making things incredibly easy for Lyse.

Sidis hung his head silently again for a few moments before once more looking back up at Lyse. “You’re right. I’ll follow your lead on this one.”

Those words warmed her heart. Sidis chose to believe in her strength, which thrilled Lyse to no end.

“Thank you so much!” she said with a great smile, getting one back from Sidis in return.

Lyse and Sidis departed the capital the following morning to initiate their plan. They were ultimately able to capture a few bird-like monsters and rat-like monsters, five in all. They planned to get more during the next attack on the capital in order to show off Lyse’s ability to tame them.

While capturing monsters that morning, however, Lyse also had a chance to experiment with the ones in her possession, and she couldn’t help remarking how obedient they were. She’d been concerned about fighting wild monsters with her tamed ones, but they followed her commands to a T. When she ordered them to attack, they did their best to take down the target; and when she ordered them to defend, they surrounded her and used their powers to shield her. Lyse felt like a commander of a battalion, although she noted that she would have to spend some time learning the varying attacks of each different species of monster.

When they returned to the palace, Lyse changed from a lady-in-waiting’s gown to something more extravagant. In the process, she introduced Atoli and the maid who always helped her get dressed to a monster.

“Is that really a monster?” Atoli asked at first, skeptically staring at the creature small enough to fit in Lyse’s palm. When she reverted the monster to its normal size, Atoli reflexively drew her sword.

“Don’t worry, Atoli. It won’t attack. I’ve been carrying it around for two days now. I even leave it be while I’m asleep, and nothing’s happened.”

“For two whole days?!” Atoli parroted. She was shocked, but seemed to believe that the monster was tame.

Lyse had another five monsters stowed away in a basket. (She’d left the remaining two with Alcede, as he seemed to be rather infatuated with their fluffy coats. He’d also claimed that he wanted to experiment and see how long they could stand to be apart from Lyse.) Atoli and the maid looked to and fro—from the small monsters in the basket, to the larger one sitting down, to each other—making sounds of curiosity and amazement.

Sidis arrived shortly after. He and Lyse decided to take a walk around the palace to show off her monsters some more. When they reached the halls heavy with traffic, passersby instinctively halted and readied their swords or magic...but then stood down. Lyse had asked the emperor to issue a proclamation that morning: *“Sidis’s fiancée has learned a spell to tame monsters. If you come across her in the palace with some in tow, do not attack without provocation.”* It seemed the whole palace had received the message.

“Behold, everyone,” Sidis announced. “It won’t attack, so do not worry.”

To demonstrate its docility, he stroked the head of the lagomorph monster. The gathering crowd widened their eyes in surprise.

“They follow my every order. If anyone wishes to touch it, please come right up,” Lyse called to the crowd.

A few spectators stepped forward. An elderly maid reached for it with a trembling hand, and she jumped with a girlish scream when she touched its fur. The monster remained still. A passing knight approached the rabbit as if he were facing a dragon. After fluffing the rabbit’s back, he burst into a smile and walked away satisfied.

The ladies-in-waiting bravely took their turns too. In fact, the fluffy monster

that resembled a rabbit seemed to be quite popular with the women in the audience. After cheerfully giving it a pet or two, they peered admiringly at its cute face.

Not too bad, Lyse thought. Her biggest concern in walking around with a monster at her side had been the possibility of scaring the court unnecessarily. In the worst case scenario, she'd feared they'd call her a demon for amassing an army of monster thralls.

The people of the empire were constantly embroiled in conflict with the monsters. Many of them had been hurt by them, or knew someone close who had. Lyse had fretted that such a personal connection to them would lead to revulsion, but her worries now seemed groundless. The proud people of the empire welcomed any ally they could get, monster or otherwise. Lyse even recalled Alcede mentioning that a fair number of researchers were already looking into creating spells to control monsters.

And so the first two days of their operation went off without a hitch. On the third, Sidis and Lyse's ceremony invitations reached nobles across the capital and word about their demonstrations in the palace spread far and wide. Visitors began knocking on the palace door, asking to see Lyse and her monsters.

It's showtime! Lyse had decided to stage a simple spectacle by having one of her monsters eat a black stone that Alcede would bring out to the courtyard. When Alcede arrived, the monster darted straight toward him like a dog who smelled a treat. The crowd trembled with fear, as it looked like the monster was going to attack Alcede...and they were all befuddled when it started nuzzling its head against the pocket of his jacket.

"It can tell, can't it? Impressive," Alcede said as rehearsed.

Lyse asked, rather dramatically, "What is it you have there? My little one's never been so interested in anything."

"My, it's one of the Donan Faith's black stones. They use these to control people who... Hey, it's not a treat, you know? Oh well, I suppose we won't miss *one*." Alcede lobbed the stone in full view of the crowd, and it landed on the stone-paved path by the fountain.

As soon as it hit the ground, the monster pounced upon it and swallowed it

whole. The beast then vanished in a cloud of black smoke the next instant. The nobles watched, their mouths agape.

“Too bad. It disappeared,” Alcede said in feigned disappointment.

“It seems my monsters have a remarkable ability to sniff out those stones,” Lyse recited.

“That would make them excellent at detecting followers of the Donan Faith and their controlled victims. A splendid security measure, don’t you think? Let’s go share this with His Majesty at once.”

“Yes, let’s.”

There, Lyse and Alcede then left the scene as the throng of nobles burst into conversation. Atoli caught her up on what was said later: *“Most could hardly believe what they saw. After His Majesty’s warning about the Donan infiltration of the palace, they seemed enthusiastic that the monsters might be able to prevent another such incident in the future.”* This was more or less what Lyse had expected.

After several more days, nobles who lived outside of the capital began arriving at the palace in anticipation of the ceremony. After hearing rumors about Lyse and her monsters, many brought their families with them as well. She now had people swarming her every time she stepped out, and she made sure to show off how her monsters would swallow the Donan stones and vanish. Each and every crowd reacted just like the first group of nobles had.

“They worship the Light of Origin like a god,” Sidis remarked, seemingly satisfied at this. “I’m sure they’re thrilled at the prospect of another way to protect it from nefarious intent.”

A few days out from the ceremony, the group moved on to the next phase of their plan. Word spread that the grand priest of the temple in charge of all imperial rituals had forbidden Lyse from bringing monsters to the engagement ceremony. He’d requested personnel from the temple to bear witness at the event, and he didn’t like the idea of monsters being in attendance at the same time... That was the official story, anyway.

“I didn’t think the temple would be so cooperative,” said Lyse.

Of course, she and the others were the ones who'd orchestrated the grand priest's decree. After the court had responded so favorably to Lyse's monsters, they were left a bit stumped for an excuse as to why they wouldn't be bringing any to the ceremony. Consulting the priest was their solution.

Sidis, who'd just returned from the temple, grinned. "The grand priest is Alcede's uncle. His family's pretty easygoing, as I'm sure you can imagine. They just asked for some sweets in return."

Apparently, the grand priest was most amenable to the plan, and he'd reassured Sidis that there was no real issue with Lyse bringing monsters to the ceremony if she so wanted. She was somewhat surprised to find out that the temple wasn't quite as straitlaced as she'd believed in her previous life...and, moreover, that Alcede's sweet tooth ran in his family.

At last, the day of the ceremony finally arrived.

"We've done everything we could, haven't we?" Lyse asked.

The group believed that word of Lyse's wondrous new talent had swept the empire. If anyone in noble society was involved with the Donan Faith, they'd surely caught wind of it by now. And all this time, Alcede's men had been watching the Lasuarl estate to no avail.

"Unfortunately, we were unable to catch the culprit the easy way," he sighed. "We just have to hope they'll bite today."

"Let's hope so," Lyse agreed.

She longed to root out the Donan Faith once and for all in the empire. She knew that the cult had a chance of resurfacing even if it was dismantled this very day, but she hoped that such a public embarrassment would give their noble followers a reason to cut ties. Part of the reason she'd wanted to demonstrate her monsters' stone-detecting abilities for all to see was to preemptively put fear in their hearts.

What's more, the emperor had already declared that anyone found to be in cahoots with the Donans would be imprisoned without magic and stripped of their title. The cultists' recruits were likely to avoid the ceremony altogether for

fear of being discovered. Even if the empire couldn't arrest every single follower, apprehending one of their figureheads publicly today would make it much more difficult for the cultists to use their stones in the empire. As a result, no one should be able to—or even dare to—repeat the incident from a hundred years ago.

“So *this* is what Sidis is into...” Alcede remarked, grinning at Lyse's dress.

Hearing this, Lyse snapped out of her thoughts and looked down at herself. Her dress was even more extravagant and elaborate than she'd expected. Ornate embroidery and jewels cascaded from her chest down to her waistline, and magnificent draping fell from her hips, made from top-shelf fabric that revealed a gorgeously stitched floral pattern in the light. Even her undergarments were of white silk and silver thread that glimmered like ocean waves when she moved, and multiple layers of delicate lace made up her bell sleeves. A dress like this would have taken an immense amount of time to sew. Apparently, Sidis had first gotten in touch with an imperial tailor when they were back in Olwen.

Sidis had actually begged Lyse, who didn't own many dresses, to let him gift her a few. She felt immensely guilty about him spending money on her, but she knew that she needed a dress worthy of an imperial engagement ceremony...and she certainly didn't expect her family to provide it. She'd been terrified that they'd demand a favor in return if she asked for one, which would only cause more trouble for Sidis in the end. Thus she'd caved to his pleas. He'd taken her to be measured again at the tailor upon returning to the empire, but it was only because work had started on the garment already that it was finished in time for the ceremony. And indeed, the dress suited Lyse beautifully.

“You think...?” Lyse asked, struggling to see what Alcede saw. He made it sound like Sidis had dressed her up to his own tastes.

“Don't you? He wanted to see you in this dress.”

Lyse was standing there, unsure of how to respond, when Sidis came in. Despite the fact that he'd already seen the dress during the fitting, he froze in his tracks at the door when he laid eyes on it now, staring at Lyse as if to forever etch her image into his mind. Lyse became unbearably bashful, feeling as if

Sidis's gaze would burn holes into her dress.

"Um, Sidis, thank you for the dress—"

"You're gorgeous," he said, gliding over to her. He smiled at the large diamond pendant around her neck and flower-shaped ornament in her braided hair. He'd picked these out as well. "The red flowers, of course, but I knew this diamond would look great on you too... Do you like it?"

"Y-Yes, thank you," Lyse answered, looking down at the floor to hide her bright red cheeks. No matter how embarrassed she was, she wanted to show Sidis her appreciation for what he'd done.

"Let's get going," he said. "It's time."

With that, Alcede swung the door open for the couple. "Miss Lyse, Sidis...your engagement battlefield awaits."

Lyse could hardly contain her laughter at such an odd sendoff for such a happy occasion. Nevertheless, it was appropriate. She and Sidis might very well be walking into battle. Lyse reached for the pocket sewn into her dress where she'd secreted away three monsters. Sidis had come through for her in that regard. He and Alcede were each carrying a monster with them as well. They'd be Lyse's sword and shield today.

"I'm counting on you guys," she whispered, and the monsters wiggled in her pocket as if to answer her call.

The ceremony was set to take place in the ballroom on the ground floor of the palace. Six knights were stationed at the entrance, and they held the grand doors open for the couple. Lyse found her feet frozen in place—anxiety was taking hold of her. She recalled how she'd guarded this very hall in her past life, however, and the nostalgia soothed her nerves.

"Lyse," Sidis encouraged her, and she began walking again.

The ballroom was packed with nobles, easily over a hundred of them. Many of them seemed to have brought their families, as Lyse spotted children here and there among the crowd. A ruby carpet stretched from the door to the altar where the emperor awaited. Three rows of attendees stood on either side,

backed by a row of knights, as if they were attending a coronation. Alcede stood behind the emperor, alongside the witnesses from the temple. Kirstin and Duke Lasuarl also stood prominently by the altar. Lyse and Sidis slowly walked down the carpet and stopped before the emperor.

No one's attacked yet... Lyse had expected the Donan Faith to ambush her at the entrance, believing she'd be the most vulnerable and inattentive there. They hadn't struck, however, so she now began to suspect that they'd attack as soon as the ritual was complete.

She and Sidis bowed when they reached the emperor.

"A joyous day for us all," he declared to the room. "Sidis Álfr of the imperial family has finally decided to take a wife. He seeks matrimony with Lyse Winslette, daughter of a baron of the Kingdom of Olwen. We stand witness to their engagement and vows... Sidis, you may now cast the spell."

The audience broke in quiet murmuring at this, evidently having heard that the couple had already completed the ritual.

Alcede addressed the crowd. "The spell was undone before the ceremony. The happy couple wishes for all our dear guests to witness the forming of their contract." This quelled the chatter.

Lyse and Sidis bowed to the emperor once more before turning to each other. They only needed to repeat what they'd done last time, but Lyse felt more nervous now than when she'd first entered the ballroom.

"I wish to marry this woman. As proof, I pledge this promise to her," Sidis swore smoothly, extending his hand to materialize a globe of light that appeared to contain a tiny sun and stars.

Lyse reached for his hand and repeated her own vow. "I too wish to marry this man. As proof, I pledge this promise to him."

As soon as the words left her mouth, the globe burst into sparkles that showered them both. While Lyse was relieved the spell was cast again, she couldn't help her amusement at recalling how dismayed she'd been the first time.

"From this moment on, I will treat you as my fiancée. I swear to protect you."

Just as he did before, Sidis took Lyse's hand and kissed her fingertip at the base of her nail.

Overwhelmed, Lyse felt her face flush. Unlike their secret engagement before, they now stood in front of an audience. As reluctant as she was to do it, she knew the only way to end the ceremony was to do her part... She quickly kissed Sidis's finger, and he chuckled softly.

"My shy girl," he whispered under the crowd's applause.

Lyse nearly sank further into embarrassment, but was forced to focus her attention elsewhere. The Donan Faith would strike now, when everyone thought the ceremony had concluded. While the grand priest blessed the couple, Lyse stroked the squirming monsters in her pocket.

"They're here," she whispered to Sidis. That was all it took.

"Got it," he softly replied.

He then gave Alcede and the emperor a look, and they answered with discreet nods. Alcede signaled to his knights with the wave of his finger, and they quietly shifted formation.

Lyse inconspicuously glanced around. *Who is it...?* Of course, she couldn't tell who was holding the stone just by looking.

"Now, some entertainment from the bride who hails from a foreign land," the emperor announced.

This was a most unusual practice for an engagement ceremony. Normally, the ritual would give way to a reception at this point, either in the same room or at another location. It was unheard of for the bride or the groom to personally provide entertainment.

Ignoring the concerned chatter running through the crowd, Lyse took a step forward. "I would like to take this opportunity to show everyone my magic. They may get close to you, but they will not harm you. Please remain calm and do not attack them." She quickly whispered to the monsters in her pocket, "You can come out, but don't eat anything."

Two of the black rabbit monsters and two four-winged birds sprang from her

pocket and darted into the audience in their petite forms.

“Eek!”

“Don’t come near me!”

The guests jumped in surprise, squealing here and there. But as Lyse had requested, they all refrained from attacking. Soon, the monsters cozied up to three members of the crowd—a small child, a noblewoman, and a slightly balding nobleman. The three of them stood there in awe for a few moments before realizing the significance of the monsters’ affinity for their accessories.

“Why are these monsters—”

“Ahhh!” The noblewoman tossed aside her necklace, which was immediately retrieved by one of the knights.

He held it, as well as the monster dangling from it, aloft and asked, “Does this belong to you, Viscountess Svel?”

“I-I never...” She tried to deny it at first, but quickly caved under the piercing gazes of the guests around her.

The father of the child another monster had approached was pleading his case with a knight, blue in the face. The nobleman hopelessly stared at the beast clinging to his bracelet, which didn’t openly contain a black stone.

“One of them was on our list of suspects,” Sidis remarked. “Not too shabby.”

“Even so...I really was expecting an ambush,” Lyse replied, looking around the room. She’d hoped to capture a Donan assassin if possible. She was certain one of them would strike after learning the black stones were now a risk, but none of the three guests the monsters had picked out of the crowd just now seemed to fit the bill.

“Prince Sidis,” Duke Lasuarl hailed as he approached. “I must thank you.”

“Thank me?” Sidis repeated, confused.

Lasuarl continued, “Not only did you find my son with one of those stones beforehand, but you kept him locked up today. I was spared a great embarrassment because of it. That good-for-nothing... Perhaps I should feed him to the monsters myself to mitigate the disgrace of having a criminal in the

family.”

Lyse stood there in shock. Did Lasuarl really value saving face more than the life of his own son? He must have been thanking Sidis because rumor had it that he was the one who’d found Karl at the villa that day. The guards knew that Lyse and a dog were with him at the time, but that bit of information seemed to have been left off the grapevine.

Sidis frowned. “Duke Lasuarl, isn’t that a bit too—”

Sidis cut himself off midsentence, reaching back to push Lyse away. She staggered, nearly tripping over her long dress. When she regained her balance and looked up, she saw Lasuarl’s sword piercing Sidis’s arm.

“Sidis!” she shouted, garnering the attention of the crowd.

“Duke Lasuarl?!” Alcede demanded.

“How could you?!” Kirstin cried in surprise, clasping a hand over her mouth. But she was no stranger to combat. She rushed over in an attempt to restrain her husband. “Stop! Why would you—”

Lasuarl shoved Kirstin aside without a thought. The crowd nearly froze in disbelief at what they were witnessing. Duke and Duchess Lasuarl weren’t known as a happy couple by any stretch of the imagination, but they’d never made any public displays of discord between them.

“Why...?” Sidis gasped.

Lasuarl replied sardonically, “If you hadn’t found him, it would have looked like Karl had just recklessly followed the intruder and gotten killed. If you hadn’t found that stone, no one would have known that Karl was being controlled. If it wasn’t for you...!” In pain, Lasuarl released his sword and clutched his own throat.

The blade slipped out of Sidis’s arm, and the clatter it made when it hit the floor seemed to bring everyone back to reality. The emperor, Alcede, and his men moved to detain Lasuarl, whose lips contorted in mad glee.

“Wait!” Lyse screamed, a second too late.

An explosion erupted—Lasuarl’s magic—shattering the floor and blanketing

the room in a cloud of smoke and dust. When it subsided, Lyse could see that the emperor and Alcede had retreated some distance away. A few knights lay on the floor between them and the mad duke.

Lasuarl turned to Lyse, who cried, "Protect me!"

The rabbit monsters thus sprang from Alcede's and Sidis's pockets, returning to their full size as they jumped in front of Lyse. One of them blocked a light spell Lasuarl fired, then vanished in a puff of black smoke.

"So you had more tucked away..." Lasuarl growled as the emperor and Alcede fired at him with their own magic to cover Lyse. Lasuarl avoided their spells with defensive magic and maneuvered away. Sidis threw a sword at the duke, the blade catching his jacket. When it did, Lasuarl's appearance blurred. Lyse doubted her eyes, but she watched as Lasuarl transformed before her. His attire remained the same, but his hair shortened and his face changed completely. His eyes turned golden.

"Lawry?!" she cried in surprise.

This man was unmistakably Karl's attendant. He leaped at Lyse in another attack, which her second monster blocked before vanishing as well.

"Long time no see, Miss Lyse," he said, bowing courteously despite having just tried to cut her down where she stood.

"Why disguise yourself...?" she asked.

Lawry had used illusion magic, which was dispelled when his jacket was cut. The disguise was particularly convincing because he'd mimicked Lasuarl's hairstyle (they shared the same hair color) and worn his clothes.

"Wh-What did you do to my husband...?" Kirstin asked, shaken by this reveal.

Lawry politely explained, "He's somewhere in his manor, albeit detained and possibly still sleeping. I wouldn't kill him after all I've gained from using him. Besides..." Lawry let out a crude chuckle. "I thought the duke would suffer more if it looked like *he* was the one who killed Miss Lyse."

Lawry's plan had apparently been to assassinate Lyse and flee the scene disguised as Lasuarl, ensuring that he would be apprehended for the murder

while Lawry himself made his getaway.

“Sorry to ruin your little plan,” Sidis remarked, holding his injured arm.

“It is a shame to waste a good plan,” Lawry nonchalantly agreed. “But all’s well that ends well. The poison will take care of you before long.”

“Poison?!” Sidis staggered, but managed to stay on his feet.

“Stand back, Sidis,” Lyse cautioned him.

Sidis did seem poisoned, most likely by Lawry’s sword. Magic alone could not negate poison, and Lyse doubted that Lawry would have used anything less than a lethal dose. She stepped out before Sidis as he stood firm.

“Since you’re not Duke Lasuarl,” Lyse said, “you deserve no mercy... Come!” At her call, the three monsters that’d sought out stones in the crowd began making their way back to Lyse.

“Buzz off!” Lawry turned to cast a spell.

“I think not!”

The emperor and his men attacked Lawry at once. He defended against their spells with his own, and feigned an attack at Lyse before leaping into the air. He meant to escape from one of the high windows in the ballroom.

Sidis responded quickly, “You’re not going anywhere!”

Glowering at Lawry, he cast a spell. There was a flash of white crystalline light. Lawry tried to evade it, but it touched his foot. A fog enwreathed him for a moment before he came crashing down to the ground...as a baby boar.

“What...? Huh?” Befuddled, Lawry wiggled out of his clothes and stood there on four cloven hooves.

“Seal his magic!” Sidis called. The knights obeyed and detained the boar.

“What did you do?!” Lawry cried. The nobles in the crowd echoed the same confusion.

“Oh, right,” Lyse muttered to herself. This kind of transformation magic was unique. Seeing that it was indeed a full-on transformation rather than an illusion of some kind, both Lawry and the audience were in awe. Lyse saw just

one problem with the situation, however. “Isn’t this...a little too cute?” she asked incredulously.

Baby boars were notoriously adorable—so much so that they could charm even the hardened hunters of the mountain. Lyse knew many who’d started keeping baby boars like dogs and became so attached that they cared for them even after they were fully grown. She couldn’t help worrying that the warden might be swayed into letting this little piggy right out of its cell.

Sidis flashed Lyse a brilliant smile. “Don’t worry, Lyse. This will solve *that* problem and leave him...rather vulnerable.” Sidis snapped his finger at Lawry, and a white fog came over the boar. “Bear this shame until you die.”



Lawry transformed back to his normal self...buck naked and pinned face-down by the knights.

"You don't need to see such filth, Lyse." Sidis pulled her close, burying her face in his chest.

"D-Damn you, you devil!" Lawry screeched, but the knights began talking over him.

"Says the naked guy," one scoffed.

"What a disgrace..." tutted another.

"Someone cover him up," ordered a third. "The ladies are staring."

Lawry quieted down, seemingly defeated by that last remark. He was then given a jacket, restrained with rope, and escorted out of the ballroom as the shocked crowd stared on in bewilderment.

"That *is* pretty embarrassing..." Lyse whispered.

Sidis nodded. "His Majesty may be the only man alive who could keep his grace like that. I will forever be in awe of his magnificence." There, he surreptitiously turned back to the emperor. "If only I were that brave..."

"P-Please no, Sidis! More importantly, what about the poison?!"

"It's not as bad as I—" Sidis faltered.

"Sidis!" Lyse caught him and cried, "Someone help!"

Some of the knights who'd just arrived at the ballroom came running over. The emperor called for a doctor, and Lyse followed close behind the knights as they carried away Sidis.

Epilogue: Cleanup Before the Party

Sidis and Lyse's reception was postponed to a week after their engagement ceremony—both to deal with the ensuing aftermath and to allow the groom-to-be time to recover. Fortunately, after being treated for the poison, Sidis was able to get out of bed the very next day and began a slow, steady recovery.

Duke Lasuarl had also been discovered without delay. He'd been drugged and robbed of his magic by a black stone, and he remained unconscious for several days afterward. Still, he managed to share as much as he knew from his bed shortly after coming to. He'd apparently struck a deal with Lawry, meaning he now had valuable information on the Donan Faith—intel that led to a raid of one of their bases and the capture of several followers.

Even during the reception, there were still knights and soldiers working hard to track down the rest of the cult. Feeling both guilty and grateful, Lyse raised a toast in their honor.

"Congratulations, Lyse. We've finally made it this far." The emperor, as the guest with the highest status, kicked things off.

"All thanks to you, Your Majesty."

The emperor then whispered, "Speaking of, about our next walk..."

"That can wait until tomorrow, surely," Sidis interrupted, his face still somewhat pallid. Nevertheless, he stood strong in a blue jacket, his black and silver cape, and emerald jewelry.

He'd gleefully told Lyse that he had chosen the jacket to match her eyes. At times, she was overwhelmed by his fascination with them. She always let him make the fashion decisions, and she'd certainly never asked for *her* dress to match *his* eyes. Even now, the jacket she was wearing matched the one he was wearing instead.

Even if such a thing ever crossed my mind, I'd never be able to ask, she silently admitted. I'd be too embarrassed.

She wondered if she had a hard time expressing her love because she simply wasn't used to it. Would she become more vocal as time passed? She had a hard time imagining it as she politely greeted guest after guest who came to offer their congratulations.

The guests then enjoyed the buffet and danced to the music played by the band in the corner of the ballroom. The first dance, of course, belonged to Lyse and Sidis. This was a tradition shared between the empire and other nations, but Lyse had never once had a chance to dance at a party when she'd worked at the imperial palace. As such, she'd asked Sidis to let her practice before the ceremony. Sidis had insisted on being her exclusive dance partner, and they'd recruited Atoli to instruct her on the lady's steps.

After managing through their first dance, Sidis quietly whispered to Lyse that he didn't want her dancing with anyone else during the reception. He then took her by the hand and led her to the balcony. This was a blessing to poor Lyse, who was rather exhausted from being the star of the party for once. She was desperate for a breather.

"Can I get you a drink?" Sidis asked once they reached the balcony railing.

"No thank you. I just had one. We only danced a single song."

"Did you want to dance some more? I said I didn't want you dancing with anyone else, but I didn't mean to disappoint you..." Sidis admitted nervously.

"Not at all. I don't want to do anything you don't want me to." Lyse didn't care to dance if it made him unhappy.

Sidis smiled in relief.

Lyse figured that he was so possessive not just because of how strongly he felt for her, but also because of his childhood. A century ago, after losing his mother, he was starved for affection. That was why he'd stuck so close to Egbert's side, and how he'd ended up spending so much time with Qatora. Lyse thus felt responsible for how her death had affected him. She'd been happy to save him, of course, but he was nevertheless forced to suffer the loss of another loved one. As such, Lyse told herself that she didn't mind him being possessive now if it put his mind at ease... Still, when she thought of things like that, she was reminded that Sidis was very much so indeed that same little boy

from a hundred years ago.

“A few new leads came in today,” he said, striking up a conversation. “Duke Lasuarl arranged the attack on the Light of Origin.”

“Duke Lasuarl did? Not the Donan Faith? Why on earth...?” Lyse couldn’t imagine his motivation for such a thing.

“Karl,” said Sidis simply.

Their son’s lack of magic had strained the relationship between the duke and duchess. Lasuarl suspected that Karl had inherited his weak mana from his mother. Lasuarl prided himself on his powerful magic, and he was notorious for his insistence that those without it were useless in battle. As such, he’d struggled to accept his own child.

Then one day the Donan Faith contacted him, apparently in search of a way into the palace. At first, they’d tried blackmailing Lasuarl over Kirstin’s use of a black stone to hide her weak magic. They demanded his cooperation in exchange for their silence. Lasuarl was shocked, of course, and he feared his wife’s secret getting out. He couldn’t bear the thought. However, Lasuarl refused to be a mere puppet. He instead arranged a deal with the Donans in exchange for his cooperation—they had to affect the Light of Origin in some way.

“But what was the point?” Lyse asked.

“To make it seem as though the weakening of the Light of Origin was responsible for the weakening magic in imperial children.”

Several of his peers in Karl’s generation had also been born with compromised magic, so Lasuarl intended to blame the phenomena on some sort of anomaly with the Light. Given the incident a hundred years prior, he even would have been happy with people speculating that it was the cause.

“As long as he could blame the children’s lack of magic on *something*, he believed it would mitigate the ‘disgrace’ of marrying someone with weak mana.”

“And here I took him for a gentleman... I feel sorry for Karl now.”

“I agree. He wasn’t thinking of Karl—only himself. It’s just...”

“There’s more?”

Sidis hesitantly continued, “This is still only a theory, but I believe that the Donan stones really may have affected the children’s mana.”

“Why’s that?”

“I was thinking of Karl, and I was reminded of the magic-inhibiting powder the cultists make from grinding up their black stones. I began to wonder if children born to parents who’ve held Donan stones for a prolonged time inherently have less mana.”

“If that’s true...” Lyse could imagine Kirstin’s tears again. “I don’t think we shouldn’t make that known yet.”

“I agree. As I said, it’s just a theory.”

If Sidis was right, imperial nobles would scorn the black stones. Yet on the other hand, it would also cast suspicion of being cultists upon any parents who produced children with weak mana in the future. It would be a difficult situation to explain to the public.

“Now,” Sidis began, changing the subject, “Lawry talked a bit today.”

“Were we able to learn anything?”

“We found out how the monsters kept getting into the palace grounds. It was the doing of the black stone powder.”

Lawry’s accomplices had been spreading it around the palace where protective magic had been cast. It essentially wore holes in the palace’s magical defenses, allowing monsters to infiltrate through them. The wind would also blow the powder away after the fact, leaving no evidence of the crime.

“But though I finally got him to talk...” Sidis muttered, reflecting on the difficulty of getting this information. “I don’t know why my confession magic doesn’t work too well on him.”

“Is it his nature, do you think?”

“We’ll have to interrogate more Donan followers we arrest to find out. In any

event, we now know that they weren't targeting you because of what happened in Olwen. They only set their sights on you and Karl to get to me and His Majesty."

"I'm glad to hear that."

She was relieved, but she'd also since gained a new power. With word spreading of her ability to sniff out the Donan stones, there was a good chance that they'd come for her in the future. Lyse, however, would be ready for them.

"The thing is..." Sidis trailed off, his expression darkening.

"What's wrong?"

"This may mean traveling all over the empire for some time. It may mean..."

"Mean what?"

Sidis cast his gaze downward. "His Majesty suggested setting our wedding date a year out from now."

"Is something wrong with that?" Lyse asked.

Short of exceptional impatience or extenuating circumstances, it was extremely normal for couples to wait that long before getting married. The bride needed time to make plans for the wedding and their new home afterward, after all. And there simply weren't spells to weave fabric or make furniture.

"You said you only wanted to add pieces we need since we'll be living in the palace anyway," complained Sidis.

"I did..."

Lyse had little desire for fancy furniture. She didn't see any problem with using what was already in the palace. Besides, the budget for such things customarily came from the bride's family, and Lyse had no intention of asking hers for anything. As such, the burden would fall on Sidis. Lyse thus scorned the idea of extravagance, especially considering the guilt she'd feel over it.

"In truth, His Majesty is talking about building a wing for us now that I'm getting married," Sidis admitted.

“Our own wing?!” Lyse exclaimed.

“Yes. He wants to build a new wing on the palace grounds...near the Light of Origin.”

“That’s a really big deal...”

“But it would be the safest place for you, and if I’m going to continue watching over the Light, it would be easiest for me to keep residing here.”

Even though Lyse could carry monsters in her pocket for protection, she’d have to be wary of surprise attacks going forward now that she posed an even greater threat to the Donan Faith. But another thought crossed Lyse’s mind... *Is this really because His Majesty wants to go on walks?*

If she and Sidis were to live in the capital, she couldn’t very well come to the palace every day. That would leave the only other two people who knew the emperor’s secret, Alcede and Sidis, who would both be busy with work. The emperor had already made a habit of asking Lyse to take him on walks if he had nothing else on his agenda when he was meant to be practicing magic. As a result, they were now going on walks every other day. Perhaps he wasn’t thrilled by the idea of downgrading to once a week or so.

I hope that’s not the only reason... Lyse thought, but she considered that it wouldn’t be the most sinister scheme she’d ever heard of.

“I agree it would probably be best for our safety,” she ultimately said.

“Are you okay with that...?” Sidis asked nervously.

Lyse answered with a laugh, “It’s not a problem. I’ll live anywhere as long as I’m with you, Sidis.” The instant those words left her mouth, Sidis pulled her into a tight embrace. “Um, people can see...!”

The party lights inside shone onto the balcony, putting the couple in view of anyone inside. Nevertheless, Lyse couldn’t escape Sidis’s arms.

“We’re at our own reception. No one would mind the newly engaged couple showing some affection,” he said.

True to Sidis’s words, the partygoers closest to the balcony politely looked away. Lyse felt her cheeks burn. While she appreciated the gesture, it also

made it quite clear that they'd witnessed the passionate embrace.

"Um, Sidis—"

When Lyse tried to ask him to refrain, he stole her lips. She quickly pulled her face away, but he kept his arms tightly wrapped around her.

"It's all your fault, Lyse."

"H-How?"

An enchanting smile crossed Sidis's face. "It's because you're too cute. I just can't help myself."

"I'm not..."

What wife wouldn't want to live with her husband? she wondered.

Sidis continued to kiss her cheeks and temples, elated. Lyse glanced back at the partygoers near the balcony door to find them forming a discreet wall with their backs to the couple. Her face was instantly ablaze. She looked down to hide herself as best she could, resting her forehead on her beloved's chest.

"Sidis, we can't..."

"Come on, Lyse," he said, tilting her head back.

"Do you *want* everyone to see?! Is this what you're into?!"

Sidis relentlessly kissed her forehead. "Isn't it obvious? I'm just making a statement so that no one will ever dare lay a finger on you."

"You're doing this on purpose?!"

Sidis met her gaze. "So just give in."

Lyse instinctively closed her eyes as Sidis leaned in, silently surrendering. She didn't dislike his kisses; they calmed her mind with a sweet sensation. If they were alone, she would have gladly relished them forever... But even now, she couldn't break free of his embrace. There was nothing else she *could* do.



Afterword

Thank you for picking up the second volume of *The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting*. After happily agreeing to get married, Lyse has moved to the empire. The couple must overcome obstacles that arise as they go to announce their engagement. I tried to sweeten their romance a little now that they know how they feel about each other.

Now, I couldn't have written this volume without my editor. I'm also extremely grateful to the illustrator, who brought so many cute scenes and animals to life wonderfully. Please also allow me to extend my thanks to my proofreaders, my publisher, and most of all you, my dear readers.

-Kanata Satsuki



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The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride: Volume 2

by Kanata Satsuki

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